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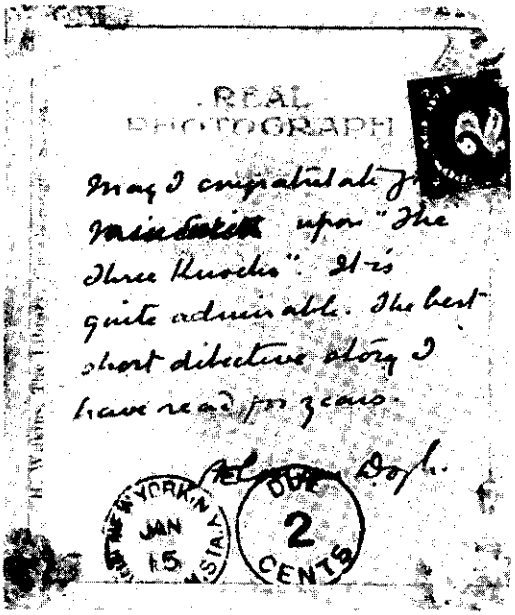
$25 *to the first reader who tells us who wrote* "THE THREE KNOCKS"

Paul R. Reynolds, the well-known literary agent of New York City, was kind enough to send us the photograph of this most provocative postcard written by A. Conan Doyle: Now, any detective story that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle considered the best he had read for years seemed an absolute "natural" for reprint in EQMM. So we promptly set out to identify the author of "The Three Knocks"—and so far all our inquiries have ended in a cul-de-sac. When we reported our failure to Mr. Reynolds, he came up with an excellent suggestion: Why not put it up to the readers of EQMM and award a prize to the first one who correctly names the author?



All entries must be postmarked no later than February 1, 1953. The contest is open to everyone except employees of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Mercury Publications, Inc., and their families.

So—who wrote "THE THREE KNOCKS"?

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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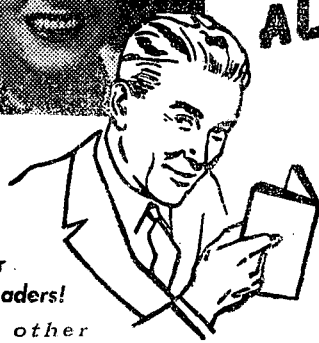

So you like ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE? Don't look now—but you're not alone. Hildegarde, the charming lady with the upswept hair, is with you. So is Christopher Morley. So is Xavier Cugat. So are literally hundreds of other greats and near greats of literature, music, business, the stage, the screen.

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Everyone knows the fabulous success of Daphne du Maurier. Her REBECCA *was a sensational bestseller and an equally sensational motion picture — altogether a* cause célèbre. *Her historical novels —* JAMAICA INN, FRENCHMAN'S CREEK, *and* THE KING'S GENERAL *— have brought Miss du Maurier world-wide fame. And her most recent novel,* MY COUSIN RACHEL, *is a Literary Guild choice that promises to match, if not actually top, her earlier achievements.*

Surely Daphne du Maurier comes by her artistic talent in the most natural way imaginable. Her grandfather, George du Maurier, was a noted artist and novelist, and her father, Sir Gerald du Maurier, was an eminent actor and theatrical director. Daphne du Maurier herself has been writing poems, plays, and short stories since she was four years old.

Miss du Maurier lives in a 70-room manor house in Cornwall. This home, steeped in tradition and history, served as the model of the estate called Manderley in REBECCA. *Her fascination with this enormous house is, in the author's own word, an "obsession." She likes to refer to it as "La Belle Maison Sans Merci," and although she has written three books about the house, she "doesn't think she is purged of it yet."*

Miss du Maurier admits that all three novels set against the background of her own home have been "directly inspired, I might even say dictated, by a nameless Something — atmosphere, spirit, call it what you will — that lurks within this house." Has some of this atmosphere, spirit, call it what you will, flowed out of the big house and become the stuff, substance, form, call it what you will, of Miss du Maurier's story titled "The Old Man"? We can't help thinking that there is some underlying connection — for there is a "nameless Something" in the strange tale of "The Old Man" that has a definitely obsessive quality . . .

THE OLD MAN

by DAPHNE DU MAURIER

DID I HEAR YOU ASKING ABOUT THE Old Man? I thought so. You're a newcomer to the district, here on holiday. We get plenty these days, during the summer months. Somehow they always find their way eventually over the cliffs down to this beach, and then they pause and look from the sea

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back to the lake; just as you did.

It's a lovely spot, isn't it? Quiet and remote. You can't wonder at the Old Man choosing to live here.

I don't remember when he first came. Nobody can. Many years ago, it must have been; he was here when I arrived, long before the war.

Perhaps he came to escape from civilization, much as I did myself. Or maybe where he lived before, the folks around made things too hot for him. It's hard to say. I had the feeling, from the very first, that he had done something, or something had been done to him, that gave him a grudge against the world.

I remember the first time I set eyes on him, I said to myself, "I bet that old fellow is one hell of a character."

Yes, he was living here beside the lake, along with his missus; funny sort of lash-up they had, exposed to all the weather, but they didn't seem to mind.

I had been warned about him by one of the fellows from the farm, who advised me, with a grin, to give the Old Man who lives down by the lake a wide berth, he didn't care for strangers.

So I went warily. I didn't stay to pass the time of day. Nor would it have been any use if I had, not knowing a word of his lingo. He was standing by the edge of the lake, looking out to sea, and from tact I avoided the piece of planking over the stream which meant passing close to him, and crossed to the other side of the lake by the beach instead.

Then, with an awkward feeling I was trespassing and had no business to be here, I bobbed down behind a clump of gorse, and took out my spy-glass, and had a peep at him.

He was a big fellow, broad and strong — he's aged of course lately, I'm speaking of several years back — but even now, you can see what he must have been once. Such power and drive behind him, and that fine head, which he carried like a king. There's an idea in that too. No, I'm not joking.

Who knows what royal blood he carried inside him, harking back to some remote ancestor, and now and again, surging in him, not through his own fault, it gets the better of him and drives him fighting mad?

I didn't think about that at the time. I just looked at him, and ducked behind the gorse when I saw him turn, and I wondered to myself what went on in his mind, and whether he knew I was there, watching him.

If he should decide to come up the lake after me, I should look pretty foolish.

He must have thought better of it though, or perhaps he did not care. He went on staring out to sea, watching the gulls, and the incoming tide, and presently he ambled off his side of the lake, heading for the missus, and home, and maybe supper.

I didn't catch a glimpse of her that first day. She just wasn't around. Living, as they do, close in by the left bank of the lake, with no proper track to the place, I hardly had the

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nerve to venture close, and come upon her face to face.

When I did see her though, I was disappointed. She wasn't much to look at after all. What I mean is, she hadn't got anything like his character. A placid, mild-tempered creature, I judged her.

They had both come back from fishing when I saw them, and were making their way up from the beach to the lake.

He was in front, of course. She tagged along behind. They neither of them took the slightest notice of me, and I was glad because the Old Man might have paused, and waited, and told her to get on back home; and then come down towards the rocks where I was sitting.

You ask what I would have said, had he done so? I'm damned if I know. Maybe I would have got up, whistling, and seeming unconcerned, and then with a nod and a smile — useless, really, but instinctive if you know what I mean — said good day, and pottered off. I don't think he would have done anything. He'd just have stared after me, with those strange narrow eyes of his, and let me go.

After that, winter and summer, I was always down on the beach, or on the rocks, and they went on living their curious remote existence, sometimes fishing in the lake, sometimes at sea, and occasionally I'd come across them in the harbor, on the estuary, taking a look at the yachts anchored there, and the shipping. I used to wonder which of them made the suggestion, she or him. Perhaps suddenly he would be lured by the thought of the bustle and life of the harbor, and all the things he had either wantonly given up, or never known, and he would say to her, "Today, we are going into town."

And she, happy to do whatever pleased him best, followed along.

You see, one thing that stood out, and you couldn't help noticing it, was that the pair of them were devoted to one another.

I've seen her greet him when he came back from a day's fishing, and had left her back home, and towards evening she'd come down the lake and onto the beach and down to the sea, to wait for him.

She'd see him coming from a long way off, and I would see him too, rounding the corner of the bay.

He'd come straight onto the beach, and she would go to meet him, and they would embrace each other, not caring a damn who saw them. Which, I don't know, was somehow touching. You felt there was something lovable about the old man, if that's how things were between them. He might be a devil to outsiders, but he was all the world to her. It gave me a warm feeling for him, when I saw them together, like that. You asked if they had any family. I was coming to that. It's about the family I really wanted to tell you. Because there was a tragedy, you see. And nobody knows anything about it except me.

I suppose I could have told someone, but if I had, I don't know. They

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might have taken the Old Man away, and she'd have broken her heart without him, and anyway, when all's said and done, it wasn't my business. I know the evidence against the Old Man was strong, but I hadn't positive proof — it might have been some sort of accident — and anyway, nobody made any inquiries at the time the boy disappeared, so who was I to turn busybody and informer?

I'll try and explain what happened. But you must understand that all this happened over quite a time, and sometimes I was away from home, or busy, and didn't go near the lake, and nobody seemed to take any interest in the couple living there but myself, so that it was only what I observed with my own eyes that makes this story, and it was nothing I heard from anybody else. No scraps of gossip, or tales told about them behind their backs.

Yes, they weren't always alone, like they are now. They had four kids. Three girls and a boy. They brought up the four of them in that ramshackle old place by the lake, and it was always a wonder to me how they did it.

I've known days when the rain lashed that lake into little waves that burst and broke on the muddy shore near their place, and turned the marsh into a swamp, and the wind driving straight in; you'd have thought anyone with a grain of sense would have taken his missus and his kids out of it, and gone off somewhere where they could get some creature comforts at least.

Not the Old Man. If he could stick it, I guess he decided she could too, and the kids as well.

Maybe he wanted to bring them up the hard way.

Mark you, they were attractive youngsters. Especially the youngest girl. I never knew her name, but I called her Tiny; she had so much "go" to her. Chip off the old block, in spite of her size.

I can see her now, as a little thing, the first to venture paddling in the lake, on a fine morning; 'way ahead of her sisters and her brother. The brother I nicknamed Boy. He was the oldest. And between you and me, a bit of a fool. He hadn't the looks of his sisters, and was a clumsy sort of fellow. The girls would play around on their own, and go fishing, and he'd hang about in the background, not knowing what to do with himself.

If he possibly could, he'd stay around home, near his mother.

Proper mother's boy. That's why I gave him the name.

Not that she seemed to fuss over him any more than she did the others — she treated the four alike, as far as I could tell. Her thoughts were always for the Old Man, rather than for them.

But Boy was just a great baby, and I have an idea he was simple.

Like their parents, the youngsters kept themselves to themselves. Been dinned into them, I daresay, by the Old Man. They never came down to the beach on their own, and it must have been a temptation, I thought, in full summer, when people came walk-

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ing over the cliffs down to the beach to bathe and picnic.

I suppose, for those strange reasons best known to himself, the Old Man had warned them to have no truck with strangers.

They were used to me, pottering, day in, day out, fetching driftwood and that; and often I used to pause and watch the kids playing by the lake. I didn't talk to them though. They might have gone back and told the Old Man. They used to look up, when I passed by, then glance away again, sort of shy; all but Tiny.

Tiny would toss her head and do a somersault, just to show off.

I sometimes watched them go off, the six of them — the Old Man, the missus, Boy, and the three girls — for a day's fishing out to sea. The Old Man, of course, in charge, Tiny eager to help, close to her Dad, the missus looking about her to see if the weather was going to keep fine, the two other girls alongside, and Boy, poor simple Boy, always the last to leave home.

I never knew what sport they had. They used to stay out late, and I'd have left the beach by the time they came back again.

But I guess they did well. They must have lived almost entirely on what they caught. Well, fish is said to be full of vitamins, isn't it? Perhaps the Old Man was a food faddist in his way.

Well, time passed; and the youngsters began to grow up.

Tiny lost something of her individuality then, it seemed to me. She grew more like her sisters. They were a nice-looking trio, all the same. Quiet, you know, well-behaved. As for Boy, he was enormous. Almost as big as the Old Man, but with what a difference!

He had none of his father's looks, or strength, or personality; he was nothing but a great clumsy lout.

And the trouble was, I believe, the Old Man was ashamed of him. He didn't pull his weight in the home, I'm certain of that. And out fishing he was perfectly useless. The girls would work away like beetles, and Boy, always in the background, making a mess of things.

And if his mother was there, he just stayed by her side.

I could see it rattled the Old Man to have such an oaf of a son. Irritated him too, because Boy was so big. It probably didn't make sense to his intolerant mind. Strength and stupidity didn't go together. In any normal family, of course, Boy would have left home by now and gone out on his own. I used to wonder if they argued about it back in the evenings, the missus and the Old Man.

Or whether it was something never admitted between them but tacitly understood — that Boy was no good.

Well, they did leave home at last. At least, the girls did.

I'll tell you how it happened.

It was a day in late autumn, and I happened to be over doing some shopping in the little town overlooking the harbor, three miles from this place, and suddenly I saw the Old

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Man, the missus, and the three girls, and Boy, all making their way up to Pont; that's the head of a creek, going eastwards, from the harbor.

There are a few cottages at Pont, and a farm and a church up behind. The family looked washed, and spruced up, and so did the Old Man, and the missus, and I wondered if they were going visiting.

If they were, it was an unusual thing for them to do. But it's possible they had friends, or acquaintances, up there, of whom I knew nothing. Anyway, that was the last I saw of them, on that fine Saturday afternoon, making for Pont.

It blew hard over the weekend — a proper easterly gale.

I kept indoors, and didn't go out at all. I knew the seas would be breaking good and hard on the beach. I wondered if the Old Man and the family had been able to get back. They would have been wise to have stayed with their friends, if they had friends there.

It was Tuesday before the wind dropped, and I went down to the beach again. Seaweed, driftwood, tar and oil all over the place. It's always the same after an easterly blow.

I looked up the lake, towards the Old Man's shack, and I saw him there, with the missus, just by the edge of the lake; but there was no sign of the youngsters.

I thought it a bit funny, and waited around, in case they should appear. They never did. I walked right round the lake and from the opposite bank I had a good view of their place, and even took out my old spyglass to have a closer look.

They just weren't there. The Old Man was pottering about, the way he often did when he wasn't fishing, and the missus had settled herself down to bask in the sun.

There was only one explanation. They had left the family with friends in Pont. They had sent the family for a holiday.

I can't help admitting I was relieved, because for one frightful moment I thought maybe they had started off back home on the Saturday night and got struck by the gale; and that the Old Man and his missus had got back safely, but not the kids.

It couldn't be that though. I should have heard. Someone would have said something. The Old Man wouldn't be pottering there in his usual unconcerned fashion, and the missus basking in the sun.

No, that must have been it. They had left the family with friends.

Or maybe the girls and Boy had gone up country, gone out on their own at last.

Somehow, it left a gap. I felt sad. So long now I had been used to seeing them all around, Tiny and the others.

I had a strange sort of feeling that they had gone for good.

Silly, wasn't it? To mind, I mean. There was the Old Man and his missus and the four youngsters, and I'd more or less watched them grow up, and now, for no reason, they had gone.

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I wished then I knew even a word or two of his language. So that I could have called out to him, neighborlike, and said, "I see you and the missus are alone. Nothing wrong, I hope?"

But there, it wasn't any use. He'd have looked at me with his strange eyes and not said a word.

I never saw the girls again. No, never. They just didn't come back. Once I thought I saw Tiny, somewhere up the estuary, with a group of friends, but I couldn't be sure. If it was, she'd grown, she looked different. I tell you what I think. I think the Old Man and the missus took them with a definite end in view, that last weekend, and either settled them with friends they knew, or told them to shift for themselves.

I know it sounds hard, not what you'd do for your own son and daughters, but you have to remember the Old Man was a tough customer, a law unto himself.

No doubt he thought it would be for the best, and so it probably was, and if only I could know for certain what happened to the girls, especially Tiny, I wouldn't worry.

But I do worry sometimes, because of what did happen to Boy.

You see, Boy was fool enough to come back.

He came back about three weeks after that final weekend.

I had walked down through the woods, not my usual way, but reached the lake by the stream that feeds it from a higher level. I rounded the lake by the marshes to the north, some distance from the Old Man's place; and the first thing I saw was Boy.

He wasn't doing anything. He was just standing by the marsh.

He looked dazed. He was too far off for me to hail him; besides, I didn't have the nerve. But I watched him, and he stood there, in his clumsy loutish way, and I saw him staring at the far end of the lake. He was staring in the direction of the Old Man.

The Old Man, and the missus with him, took not the slightest notice of Boy. They were close to the beach, by the plank bridge, and were either just going out to fish, or coming back; and here was Boy, with his dazed, stupid face, but not only stupid — frightened.

I wanted to say, "Is anything the matter?" — but I didn't know how to say it. I stood there, like Boy, staring at the Old Man.

Then, what we both must have feared would happen, did happen.

The Old Man lifted his head and saw Boy.

He must have said a word to his missus, because she didn't move. She stayed where she was, by the bridge, but the Old Man turned like a flash of lightning, and came down the other side of the lake towards the marshes, towards Boy.

He looked terrible. I shall never forget his appearance. That magnificent head I had always admired, now angry, evil; and he was cursing Boy as he came; I tell you, I heard him.

Boy, bewildered, scared, looked

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hopelessly about him for cover. There was none. Only the thin reeds that grew beside the marsh. But the poor fellow was so dumb he'd have gone in there, and crouched, and believed himself safe.

It was a horrible sight.

I was just getting my own courage up to interfere when the Old Man stopped suddenly in his tracks, pulled up short as it were, and then, still cursing, muttering, turned back again: and returned to the bridge. Boy watched him, from his cover of reeds; then, poor clot that he was, he came out onto the marsh again, with some idea, I suppose, of striking for home.

I looked about me. There was no one to call. No one to give any help. And if I went and tried to get someone from the farm they would tell me not to interfere, that the Old Man was best left alone when he got in one of his rages, and anyway, that Boy was old enough to take care of himself.

He was as big as the Old Man. He could give as good as he got.

But I knew different. Boy was no fighter. He didn't know how.

I waited quite a time beside the lake, but nothing happened.

It began to grow dark. It was no use my waiting there. The Old Man and the missus left the bridge and went on home. Boy was still standing there on the marsh, by the lake's edge. I called to him, softly.

"It's no use. He won't let you in. Go back to Pont, or wherever it is you've been. Go some place, anywhere, but get away from here."

He looked up, that same queer dazed expression on his face; and I could tell he hadn't understood a word I said.

I felt powerless to do any more. I went home myself. But I thought about Boy all evening, and in the morning I went down to the lake again and I took a great stick with me to give me courage.

Not that it would have been much good. Not against the Old Man. Well . . . I suppose they had come to some sort of agreement, during the night. There was Boy, by his mother's side, and the Old Man was pottering on his own.

I must say, it was a great relief. Because, after all, what could I have said or done? If the Old Man didn't want Boy home, it was really his affair. And if Boy was too stupid to go, that was Boy's affair.

But I blamed the mother a good deal.

After all, it was up to her to tell Boy he was in the way, and the Old Man was in one of his moods, and Boy had best get out while the going was good.

But I never did think she had great intelligence. She did not seem to show much spirit at any time.

However, what arrangement they had come to, worked for a time.

Boy stuck close to his mother — I suppose he helped her at home, I don't know — and the Old Man left them alone and was more and more by himself.

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He took to sitting humped, down by the bridge, staring out to sea, with a queer brooding look on him.

He seemed strange, and lonely. I didn't like it.

I don't know what his thoughts were, but I'm sure they were evil. It suddenly seemed a very long time since he and the missus and the whole family had gone fishing, a happy, contented party.

Now everything had changed for him. He was thrust out in the cold, and the missus and Boy stayed together.

I felt sorry for him, but I felt frightened too. Because I felt it could not go on like this; something would happen.

One day I went down to the beach for driftwood — it had been blowing in the night — and when I glanced towards the lake I saw that Boy wasn't with his mother; he was back where I had seen him that first day, on the edge of the marsh.

He was as big as his father, and if he'd known how to use his strength he'd have been a match for him any day; but he hadn't the brains.

There he was, back on the marsh, a great big frightened foolish fellow, and there was the Old Man, outside his home, staring down towards his son with murder in his eyes.

I said to myself, "He's going to kill him."

But I didn't know how, or when, or where; whether by night, when they were sleeping, or by day, when they were fishing.

The mother was useless, she would not prevent it.

It was no use appealing to the mother. If only Boy would use one little grain of sense, and go away . . .

I watched and waited until nightfall. Nothing happened.

It rained in the night. It was gray, and cold, and dim.

December was everywhere, trees all bare and bleak.

I couldn't get down to the lake until late afternoon, and then the skies had cleared and the sun was shining in that watery way it does in winter — a burst of it, just before setting below the sea.

I saw the Old Man. And the missus too. They were close together, by the old shack, and they saw me coming, for they looked towards me.

Boy wasn't there.

He wasn't on the marsh either. Nor by the side of the lake.

I crossed the bridge and went along the right bank of the lake, and I had my spyglass with me, but I couldn't see Boy.

Yet, all the time, I was aware of the Old Man watching me.

Then I saw him. I scrambled down the bank, and crossed the marsh, and went to the thing I saw lying there, behind the reeds.

He was dead. There was a great gash on his body. Dried blood on his back. He had lain there all night. His body was sodden with the rain.

Maybe you'll think I'm a fool, but I began to cry, like an idiot, and I shouted across to the Old Man, "You

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murderer, you bloody murderer!"

He did not answer. He did not move. He just stood there, outside his shack with the missus, watching me.

You'll want to know what I did. I went back and got a spade and I dug a grave for Boy, in the reeds behind the marsh, and I said one of my own prayers for him, being uncertain of his religion.

When I had finished I looked across the lake to the Old Man, and do you know what I saw?

I saw him lower his great head and bend towards his missus and embrace her. And she lifted her head to him and embraced him too.

It was both a requiem and a benediction. An atonement and a giving of praise. In their strange way, they knew they had done evil, but now it was over, because I had buried Boy, and he was gone.

They were free to be together again and there was no longer a third to come between them.

They came out into the middle of the lake, and suddenly I saw the Old Man stretch his neck, and beat his wings, and he took off from the water, full of power, and she followed him, and I watched the two swans fly out to sea right into the face of the setting sun, and I tell you it was one of the most beautiful sights I ever saw in my life — the two swans flying there, alone, in winter . . .

"O"

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THE MAN WHO COULD NOT HOLD WOMEN

by ROY VICKERS

IN A LETTER WRITTEN ON THE EVE OF execution, Arthur Penfold seems to share the judge's astonishment that a man of his calibre should turn to murder to extricate himself from a domestic difficulty. A student of criminology could have told Penfold — if not the learned judge himself — that murder eventuates not from immediate circumstance but from an antecedent state of mind.

The murder occurred in 1935. The antecedent state of mind was created five years earlier, on an October evening when Penfold, returning from his office, found a note in his wife's handwriting on the hall table.

Penfold, an only child of very doting parents, was born in 1900. At 25 he inherited the family business, a wholesale agency for technical inks — almost any ink except the kind one uses with a pen. His mother had died the previous year. For three years he lived alone in the twelve-room house, with an acre of garden, in the overgrown village of Crosswater, some twenty miles out of London. The house was vibrant with memories of a benevolently autocratic father, whose slightest wish became his wife's instant duty, whose opinions on everything she accepted as inspired wisdom. In April 1931 Arthur Penfold married and eagerly set about modeling his life on that of his father.

Of his bride we need note only that she had been an efficient business girl, a rung or two up the ladder, that she was physically attractive and well-mannered — the sort of girl his friends expected him to choose. They had been married six months to a day when he found that note in the hall — six months, he would have told you, of unalloyed happiness. A wife who — *ex officio*, as it were — liked all the things that he liked, lived for the great moment of the day when he returned home, to regale her with small talk of his achievements in business. There was not, he would have asserted, a single cloud in his matrimonial sky.

Arthur, dear. I am terribly sorry and utterly ashamed of myself, but I can't stick it any longer. It's not your fault — I have no complaint and no excuse. I shall stay with Mother while I'm looking for a job. I don't want any money, please, and I'll agree to anything as long as you don't ask me to come back — Julie.
P.S. There isn't another man and I don't suppose there ever will be.

Julie remained unattached for three years. Then she wrote Penfold beg-

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ging for divorce, as she wished to remarry. Penfold chivalrously insisted that he should be the one to give cause, so that she could start again untainted with scandal. He did not hate Julie, but he did hate himself and to a somewhat dangerous degree.

He was the fourth generation of his family to live in that house. The Penfolds were of the local aristocracy and "knew everybody," meaning 50 or so of the more prosperous families in a largish suburb. Arthur Penfold — though no one claimed him as an intimate friend — was popular, in the sense that no one disliked him nor ever suggested excluding him. He was of medium height, with thin, sandy hair, a little ponderous in manner, self-centred but not boastful. When he was deserted, for no apparent reason, "everybody" agreed that he had been abominably treated and was entitled to sympathy.

While Julie was with him, his own happiness had been obvious to everybody. He had taken for granted that Julie was happy too. How could a happy husband have an unhappy wife? But, somehow, it had happened!

Why had she left him? Too late, he tried to imagine her point of view. It was uphill work, because he knew nothing of her intimate personal history, her tastes, her hopes, her fears. In the sense in which married lovers explore each other's personality and impulse, he knew nothing at all about her — had desired no such knowledge. It escaped him that this might be the reason why Julie had thrown in her hand.

In the sympathy of the neighbors he saw only pity for a man who had some taint or defect, unknown to himself, which made his society intolerable to a normal woman. How could he doubt that behind a mask of friendliness the neighbors were laughing at him?

There was a certain tragic grandeur in the idea of a man with a taint that baffled definition. In a short time, he began to believe in it.

The desertion was followed by three years of bitter self-contempt, during which every friendly greeting was held to mask a sneer. Irrelevantly, he felt a little better when the divorce was completed. In the summer he accepted an invitation to stay with a cousin who was the vicar of Helmstane. Here he met Margaret Darrington, who became his second wife.

Margaret was twenty-four and a beauty, though she seemed not to know it. Her clothes, expensive but ill-chosen, verged on dowdiness. She lacked the assurance of a girl specially gifted by nature. Her intelligence was adult, but her temperament was that of a prim young schoolgirl with a talent for obedience. At their first meeting, Arthur Penfold, perceiving the talent for obedience, wanted to marry her much more than he had ever wanted anything.

"A very grave young person," the vicar told him. "She lives with an honorary aunt to whom she is devoted — er — excessively so!" The

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vicar pulled himself up. "Perhaps that was a mean remark in the special circumstances." He told a tragic tale. In the 1914 war, when Margaret was six her mother had been killed in an air raid on London, while the child was in Helmstane with a Mrs. Blagrove. Scarcely had Mrs. Blagrove finished breaking the news to the little girl when a War Office telegram announced that her father had been killed in action. Mrs. Blagrove cherished the orphan, adopted her, and did her best to fill the role of both parents.

"With indifferent success, I fear," finished the vicar. "Margaret is a dear girl — she helps me with the parish chores, which is convenient for me but not really the sort of thing she ought to be doing. She has lost her place in her own generation and shows no desire to find it. I would guess that she is, perhaps, unadventurous — a little afraid of life."

Too afraid of life, in fact, to run away from a husband, who would stand between her and the world, which she need apprehend only through his eyes. Penfold required no further information about the girl; he did not inquire into her tastes or her hopes or her fears. For their first date he asked her to meet him in London for lunch and a matinee.

For an instant, the schoolgirl personality vanished. The wide-set eyes became the eyes of a vital young woman reaching out for her share of gaiety. But only for an instant.

"I'll ask Aunt Agnes."

Six weeks later, in a punt on the river, he told her that it was in her power to make him extremely happy. He gave instances of so many ways in which she could give him happiness that the idea of marrying him began to take on the color of a moral duty. Whether he could give her a commensurate happiness was a question which was not raised by either side.

Margaret admitted having observed that a girl was expected to marry and leave home — even when her own people were fond of her, which she thought puzzling.

"Then you *will*, Madge?"

"I'll ask Aunt Agnes."

"No, darling!" said Penfold, who had not yet discovered that she was intelligent. "We'll go back at once and I'll tell her myself."

Mrs. Blagrove had draped her Victorian furniture in bright chintzes, hung a nude or two on her walls, and believed the result to be modern. She believed the same of herself. In the 90's she had considered herself one of the New Women — had she not smoked cigarettes and read the early works of Bernard Shaw? — though she secretly preferred the output of Ella Wheeler Wilcox, whose sentimental verse was already crossing the Atlantic. She had an income sufficient for all the hobbies and good works with which she fought her dread of a lonely old age.

She began by putting Penfold at his ease, which slightly offended him

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and spoiled his tactical approach.

"I know why you have come, Mr. Penfold." Her smile was elaborately confidential. "I'll say it for you, shall I? You have *asked* Madge, and she has referred you to me. I've felt this in the air for a fortnight. And there was no way of warning either of you."

"But, Mrs. Blagrove! You cannot mean that you refuse your consent?"

"I have no such authority — my guardianship expired when she was twenty-one."

"She would never take an important step against your wishes."

"Nor an unimportant step, either. My moral influence, I admit, is paramount. For that very reason, I shall not exercise it. I shall urge Madge to do whatever she wants to do." Before Penfold could express satisfaction, Mrs. Blagrove added: "I shall simply advise her not to think any more about it. Advice — that will be all!"

Her tone removed insult from her words. Penfold retreated to prepared ground.

"Perhaps you will allow me to give a brief account of myself."

The brevity, however, was not noticeable. Mrs. Blagrove politely refrained from registering inattention.

"In short, you are extremely eligible — the vicar told me all about you." She paused before resuming, on another note. "Mr. Penfold! Have you noticed, as I have, that some women are predestined mothers — you can tell when they're little girls? And some have an obvious talent for wifehood. And some — and Madge is one of these — are predestined *daughters* — daughters in mind and temperament even when they are very old women."

"Old maids, perhaps. But when Madge is married —"

"She'll make her husband more unhappy than herself. Other men have thought they were in love with her, because she's such a pretty thing. But their man's instinct warned them that too much of her would be withheld. Haven't you noticed how she comes to me to ask permission or advice on trifling matters? — and she's twenty-four, remember. It's she who insists on that sort of thing, not I. I flatter myself I'm a modern woman. I believe in complete freedom for women, single or married."

Penfold retained only the impression that "the old lady" intended to keep the girl to herself. He was ready to fight her, tooth and claw. But there was nothing to fight. When Margaret reported back to him, he could hardly take in her words.

"I'm so glad Aunt Agnes doesn't refuse her consent. She just advises us not to. But I think — I'm sure — it's only because she would hate to seem to be glad to get rid of me. It's not reasonable to suppose she really wants me on her hands forever. So, if you still feel sure that you do, Arthur —"

Penfold expected at best some sulkiness on the part of his honorary mother-in-law. To his amazement, she kept her word to urge the girl to do

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what she wanted to do. Mrs. Blagrove was positively cooperative. Pursuing some dimly understood ideal of modernity, she turned her energies to detail, took competent advice in the purchase of a most comprehensive trousseau. Further, she forced the girl into the hands of a beautician for grooming and general instruction.

The result was that Margaret's natural beauty was brought into line with modern standards. Julie had been ordinarily good-looking — Margaret would catch the eye in any community. In Crosswater, the women would be jealous and the men would be envious. They would soon see how wrong they had been in supposing that he could not hold the interest of an attractive wife.

On the last day of their honeymoon in Cornwall, there came a letter from Mrs. Blagrove, jointly addressed and beginning *My dears*, announcing that she had sold her house in Helmstane, bought another for the same price in Crosswater, and would shortly move in.

"That's almost too good to be true!" exclaimed Margaret. "I can run round every day while you're in London and see that she's all right."

For a few seconds, Penfold hovered on the brink of protest. So that was the game! For all her amiability — for all that really broad-minded trousseau — Mrs. Blagrove was hostile and intended to wreck their marriage. She would fail. Margaret's talent for obedience, which had given him such a delightful honeymoon, would prove a two-edged sword, and — and so on!

"I hope, darling," he said, feeling extremely clever, "that Aunt Agnes will stay with us while she is moving in."

Mrs. Blagrove did not stay in their house, but she let Margaret help her with the moving, taking scrupulous care that Penfold's convenience should not be jeopardized. Very shrewd of her, thought Penfold. But he too knew how to wear the velvet glove . . .

Mrs. Blagrove's house was some half a mile away: visits were constantly exchanged. No man could have been more attentive to his mother-in-law, honorary or otherwise.

In time, they slipped into a little routine. On Wednesday evenings, the Penfolds dined at Dalehurst, Mrs. Blagrove's daily help staying after 6. On Sundays, Mrs. Blagrove came for supper to Oakleigh, when Penfold would read aloud a selection from the poems of Ella Wheeler Wilcox who, in Mrs. Blagrove's affections, had never had a rival.

Penfold became aware that on most days of the week Margaret would "run round" to Dalehurst. Many minor domestic arrangements were traceable to Mrs. Blagrove; but they were sensible arrangements, which enhanced his comfort without impinging on his authority. Margaret never quoted Aunt Agnes. It would

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have been unintelligent to deny that the old lady seemed to be playing no game but an unobtrusively benevolent one. He began to think highly of her, even to enjoy her company, except for the sessions of Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Twice she insinuated a Mrs. Manfried, a fellow devotee. It was his sole grievance.

A year passed, during which Penfold put back the weight he had lost after the collapse of his first marriage. His dream had come true. The women were jealous of Margaret, and the men, within the framework of correct behavior, registered an envious appreciation of her. No longer did the smile of welcome seem to mask a sneer, tempered with pity. He could not bring himself to grudge the time his wife spent at Dalehurst, in his absence. Mrs. Blagrove's prophecy that Margaret would make her husband unhappy now appeared foolish. His life slipped into the pattern of his father's.

The inner history of an egocentric tends to repeat itself. The other half of Mrs. Blagrove's prophecy — the half that was concerned with Margaret's happiness — had slipped from Penfold's memory. He was so happy himself that he had not felt the need to probe into the question of Margaret's happiness — to explore her personality and her impulse. She was an efficient and economical housekeeper. She was of regular, orderly habits. She was lovely to look at and she was obedient in all things. His cup was full.

They had been married two years and a month when Mrs. Blagrove fell down in her bedroom and put a finger out of joint. The injury was beginning to be forgotten, when she fell down in the hall, bruising herself painfully. She was not too shaken, however, to come to supper on Sunday — to be whisked back to her girlhood by Penfold, in his interpretation of Ella Wheeler Wilcox.

The following week, a trained nurse took up residence at Dalehurst, though Mrs. Blagrove seemed to ignore her presence and to carry on as usual. In the course of a fortnight Margaret overcame her aunt's reluctance to reveal the facts.

"She falls down because she suddenly loses consciousness," Margaret told her husband. "It's her heart. But Dr. Delmore says her life is in no danger."

Penfold expressed relief. But there was more to come.

"The air here is too bracing, Dr. Delmore says. She will have to sell her house and leave. He recommends South Devon."

Some 200 miles from London! That, Penfold admitted to himself, could be borne with equanimity. He was, in fact, about to say as much.

"I'm sorry, Arthur dear, but I must go with her."

"Yes, darling, of course you must. I'll squeeze a week off and we'll all go down together and settle her in."

"Doctor Delmore says" — it was as if Penfold had not spoken — "that these little attacks may be frequent.

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They may come at any hour of the day or night. She might fall in the fire — under the traffic — anything. She must never be alone."

Still Penfold could not see it.

"That means two nurses. Pretty hefty expense —"

"There won't be two nurses. There won't be one. She can't get on with nurses. That nice Nurse Hart has gone, and Aunt Agnes says she won't have another. I must go to her, Arthur. That's what I'm trying to tell you."

There came a moment of stark panic — a long moment in which he again ran the gauntlet of smiles that masked the universal sneer at the man who cannot hold his woman.

"She may live for twenty years or more. Do you want to end our marriage, Madge?"

"It isn't a matter of what I want," she evaded. "Remember, she isn't my aunt, really. She didn't even like me, to start with — I was the horrid child of a young couple she had met on a pleasure cruise. I've never forgotten. All my life I've wondered what I could do in return."

"I'm not belittling her. But what about me? What have I done that I should lose my wife?"

"Nothing. You speak as if I were complaining of you — I'm not — it wouldn't be fair." The unconscious echo of Julie's words made him feel faint. "But you don't *need* me, Arthur — not me in particular, I mean."

"Of course I need you! To come home in the evening, with no wife to welcome me —"

"You'll soon find a quiet girl, whose looks appeal to you — you ask so little, Arthur. Then, everything will be the same for you." She spoke without a trace of bitterness. "But Aunt Agnes needs me as *me*!"

He did not understand and would not try. The sense of defeat was numbing him. He went into the dining room and took a stiff whiskey. He would put his case firmly but fairly to Aunt Agnes, with every consideration for her feelings. Velvet glove, in fact. Now he came to think of it, her birthday fell on the day after tomorrow. That could be used to help his opening.

The next day was damp and foggy, increasing his depression, so that he left the office earlier than usual, determined to see Mrs. Blagrove at once.

Now, by chance — good or ill according to one's point of view — a popular publisher had decided to stage a comeback for the poetry of Ella Wheeler Wilcox and was flooding the bookstalls with an initial anthology: *The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox*. There was a double pyramid at one of the bookstalls at Waterloo station, which duly caught Penfold's eye.

The very thing! It would help him to open the interview on a friendly note.

He bought a copy, decided to retain the dust jacket, which carried a design of moonbeams and cupids — "the old lady" reacted to that sort of

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thing when you steered her into the mood for it.

On arriving at Crosswater at 5:03, he reflected that Madge would not be expecting him for another hour — she had said that she would be helping at the vicarage that afternoon. So, instead of going home first, he trudged through the rain and fog to Dalehurst. Mrs. Blagrove was drawing the curtains when he appeared in the front garden. She beckoned to him and unlatched the French window.

"Come in this way, if you don't mind. It's Bessie's afternoon for visiting her grandmother at the hospital. She's supposed to pay me back the time on Saturday, but she always has some excuse. You're home early, aren't you?"

He agreed with enthusiasm, went into the hall to deposit his coat and hat, and returned, flourishing *The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox*.

"This is just out — an anthology. Thought you might like it. Sort of pre-birthday present."

"How thoughtful and kind of you, Arthur! What a perfectly lovely design! I expect I know all the selections — I hope I do!" She lowered herself to the chintz-covered settee and turned the pages. When Penfold had finished settling himself in an armchair, Mrs. Blagrove was sitting with her hands folded in her lap. The book was not in evidence.

"You've come to talk about Madge, haven't you?"

"And about you and me, Aunt Agnes. It's sheer tragedy that you have to go and live somewhere else. We made a perfect little circle, the three of us. I can safely say that, these last two years, I have been as happy as any man can hope to be."

"Yes . . . yes, I've noticed that you have."

The remark seemed out of focus. Also, Aunt Agnes looked amused, instead of impressed. He reminded himself that he must be firm as well as fair.

"I have to live near London, of course. That puts Madge in a terrible position. I would not for one moment dispute your claim to a sacrifice on her part —"

"'Sacrifice'!" Mrs. Blagrove laughed, somewhat loudly. "Let's see if I've got it the right way round. It would be a sacrifice on *her* part to leave *you* and resume her life with *me*? Sacrifice of what, Arthur?"

While he was groping for a retort, she added:

"There are some things that women cannot conceal from each other, however hard they try."

"What has Madge to conceal from you?" he blustered. "Do I stint her allowance? Do I ask too much of her in return?"

"You ask too little. So that the little you do ask becomes a soul-destroying chore!"

Within him was rising a strange kind of fear, which he did not know to be fear of himself.

"To me, that doesn't make sense. But perhaps it's my fault. Perhaps I have some blind spot — some —

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taint — of which I am unaware."

"It's nothing so interesting as a taint, Arthur." She was leaning forward on the settee. Her elbows were bent, quivering a little. She seemed to him like a spider about to pounce. "Poor boy!" She was smiling now. "Your egotism protects you from all unpleasant truths — protects you, even, from the hunger for companionship and shared emotion. I'm afraid I must tell you something about yourself — something that's not a bit mystical or dramatic."

"*No!*"

There was an antecedent state of mind, unsuspected by the judge, which made Penfold see in her smile the sneer which he had dreaded to see on the face of his friends, the sneer at the man who cannot hold his woman.

"Your first marriage" — she was saying, though her words now were lost to him — "like your second, failed because you don't want a wife — you want a puppet that can only say 'yes'."

He had no purpose except that of compelling her to silence, lest she shatter that little world in which he lived so happily with a wife who mirrored his picture of himself. He seized her by the throat — his grip grew in strength while his mind's eye was rereading Julie's letter: *I am terribly sorry and utterly ashamed of myself, but I can't stick it any longer.* Madge would leave him, too — and again he would be pitied as the man without a woman of his own. If he had been of a different social type, he might have described his ecstasy as "seeing red and then getting a blackout." He certainly went through a process comparable with that of regaining consciousness, though he was unsurprised when he found that Mrs. Blagrove was dead.

He lurched into the chintz-covered armchair.

"Look what you've done to us *now*, Aunt Agnes!" He whimpered like a child. He was too profoundly shocked to feel fear for himself. This would be the biggest scandal Crosswater had ever known. There was little he could do to avert it, but that little must be done.

With his handkerchief he wiped the chintz of the armchair. In the hall he wiped the hatstand and the peg on which he had hung his coat. He put on his coat and hat — and his gloves — unlatched the front door, stepped outside and shut it behind him.

He waited a minute or more, listening. He walked down the path to the gate . . .

"*The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox!*" he muttered. "There'll be my fingerprints on that glossy jacket."

He took off his right glove, found his penknife, opened it, then put the glove on again. With some difficulty he raised the latch of the French windows, slithered round the curtain.

He had left the light burning. In this mild-mannered suburbanite there was no emotion at the sight of the woman he had killed — some seven or eight minutes ago. He was concen-

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trated on reclaiming the book, and it was not beside the body, where he had expected it to be. It was not on the seat of the settee nor on the arms nor on the floor.

He was beginning to get flustered, but only because he was always a duffer at finding things. He went down on his knees, looked under the settee — if it had fallen, he might have kicked it there himself. He crawled round to the back of the settee. He stood up, exasperated. The book simply must be in the room somewhere! He took a couple of steps backwards, bumped against the open flap of the escritoire. He wheeled as if a hand had touched him — and stared down at the cupids dancing in the moonbeams.

While he was picking up the book, his eye measured the distance from the back of the settee to the open flap of the escritoire — a good six feet.

How did the book get there, he wondered. She had it in her hand when she sat down, and he could not remember her leaving the settee. Could someone have entered the room, while he was outside the house? He hurried into the hall, intending to search the house, then abandoned the idea as useless. Anyway, it was much more likely that she had moved while they were talking, without his noticing it. Mustn't start imagining things and giving way to nerves!

He put the book in his overcoat pocket and leaving the light burning, again left the house by the front door, forgetting to refasten the French window. The fog was being thinned out by a rising wind: with the light rain, visibility was still very poor.

He turned up his collar and adopted a slouch — he would be safe from recognition unless he came face to face with an acquaintance. He reached the gate of Oakleigh more than half an hour before his usual time. He observed that the lights were on in the kitchen but nowhere else. Madge, evidently, was still at the vicarage. He must get in without the cook and housemaid hearing him.

He used his latchkey silently, hung up his coat and hat, and crept into the drawing room. He switched on the stove and put *The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox* on an occasional table where Madge would be sure to see it — it would serve as a diversion. Now and again he chuckled to himself, as if he were taking rather sly measures to prevent the club secretary from learning that a friend had broken one of the rules.

He was still alone at five to six when, straining his ears, he could hear the train coming in, then rumbling away. Dangerously soon, he heard Madge's latchkey.

"Why, Arthur! You've beaten me! You must have galloped from the station!"

"I caught the earlier train — miserable day and not much doing at the office. I was dozing off when I heard your latchkey."

She was facing the occasional table — staring at the moonbeams and

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cupids. She looked disappointed — held the book as if she resented its presence in the house.

"It's not for you!" he laughed. "It's a Wilcox anthology. Out today. I thought Aunt Agnes might like to have it."

"Oh, Arthur, how kind of you!" Her voice was unsteady. With unwonted impulsiveness, she threw her arms round his neck. He was unaware that this was the first time she had volunteered a caress. "Let me take it to her tomorrow morning — please — I want to tell her how you thought of it for her."

Almost reverently, she replaced the book on the little table.

"As you like, dear." The daily help would arrive at Dalehurst about 8 in the morning. The alarm would come, probably, while they were having breakfast.

After dinner Madge slipped away, to reappear soon in galoshes and raincoat.

"I promised the vicar I'd take some things to Mrs. Gershaw. I shan't be long."

"It's a filthy night — let me go for you."

"No, thanks. There's a lot of explanation and — and their telephone is out of order."

As soon as his wife had left the house, Penfold became uneasy. It would be all right, he kept telling himself, provided she did not "run round" to Dalehurst with that wretched book. Presently he remembered that she had put it back on the occasional table. He swung round in his chair.

The book was no longer on the table.

Mrs. Gershaw lived less than 100 yards away. In half an hour Penfold's nerve began to fail. He had endured an hour and five minutes before Margaret returned.

"What's the matter, Madge?"

"Aunt Agnes is dead. Someone has killed her!"

"Nonsense! How d'you know? Have you been to Dalehurst?"

He had to repeat the question.

"Dr. Delmore saw me from his car and stopped."

That was all right, then! Sympathy for a bereavement was indicated. He made a suitable exclamation, would have taken her in his arms.

"I want to be alone, Arthur."

She walked past him, up the stairs to her room. She had never behaved like that before. The house suddenly seemed stiflingly hot. He opened the front door and stood on the porch.

He was there when the police came.

But it was soon obvious that they had found nothing that need disturb him. They did not insist on seeing Madge, were content with his account of her movements and his own. They were even chatty, told him that Dr. Delmore, passing in his car, had seen the light in the drawing-room of Dalehurst and the French window swinging in the wind and had gone in to investigate. He had telephoned the police and on the way home had

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spotted Mrs. Penfold in the road and told her. There was, Penfold assured himself, nothing to worry about.

At the inquest, Dr. Delmore testified that death had taken place between 5 and 6 o'clock and was due to heart failure caused by partial asphyxia resulting from strangulation. Margaret Penfold stated that she had lunched at Dalehurst, leaving at a quarter to 3 to go to the vicarage. Mrs. Blagrove had seemed to be in normal health, and was expecting no visitor. Margaret was confident that deceased had no personal enemy. Arthur Penfold was not called.

Police evidence revealed that the latch of the French window had been lifted with a penknife, and so clumsily that the woodwork had been chipped. The ground had been too wet to yield footprints of any value. The Coroner was encouraged to believe that an unpractised crook had assaulted the deceased, intending to make her disclose the whereabouts of valuables, and had then become frightened and fled — there had been no robbery. The jury returned the obvious verdict and expressed gratification that the local police had been prompt in asking the aid of Scotland Yard.

On taking over, Chief Inspector Karslake ordered an intensive search of the drawing-room for some personal trace of the killer.

"She was on that settee when he attacked her. He must have been leaning well over. Try the folds of the upholstery — between the seat and the back."

The result was disappointing. Between the folds of the upholstery were found three thimbles, two pairs of scissors, nine handkerchiefs, and a book in its dust jacket — *The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox*.

"That's too thick to have slipped down, sir — must've been pushed down."

Karslake examined the book. A new copy, and there was nothing to distinguish it from any other copy in the first edition. He opened it in the middle.

"Poetry!" He glanced back at the moonbeams and cupids. "Love stuff. And she was 64! Didn't want to be caught at it. Check on the local booksellers — I guess she probably bought it herself. Try those curtains."

Kershaw collected relevant gossip from the local superintendent, then set about eliminating the Penfolds. Margaret was easily disposed of because her movements were checkable up to 6 o'clock, when the cook and housemaid heard her talking to her husband in the drawing-room.

Penfold's statement that he had arrived at Crosswater station at 5:03 was confirmed by the ticket collector. His servants had not heard him come home, so could not deny that he might have come straight home from the station. This was a negative alibi which left the theoretical possibility that Penfold might have behaved as, in fact, he did behave, but there was no single item of evidence in support.

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Innocent persons, in the orbit of a murder, often had no positive alibi.

Moreover, in Penfold's case, motive was apparently lacking. There was no known quarrel, nor conflict of interest. The Penfolds were financially comfortable. Mrs. Blagrove's income had been derived from an annuity. To Mrs. Penfold she had left a sum in cash, her furniture and her house. But the house had been bought on mortgage and the whole estate would barely yield £1500.

After the inquest, the feeling of tension passed from Penfold. Insofar as he thought clearly about his crime, he reasoned that the police would find evidence against him at once or not at all. For the rest, he had not planned to kill a fellow creature. He had been the unwitting instrument of fate, in whose hand he was soon able to detect a measure of poetic justice.

Madge's general demeanor caused him no unease, though she cut short his not infrequent attempts to express condolence. She spoke hardly at all. However, ten days after the murder — on the evening of the day when Scotland Yard abandoned further work in the locality — she shook off her lethargy.

"I shall not go into mourning for Aunt Agnes," she said, in the drawing-room after dinner. "It wouldn't express anything to me."

"As you please, dear." His voice was low and a little funereal. "I think people will understand — you have been so brave!"

"Oh, no! But I have awakened! The shock did it — the shock of learning that some frightened lout who wasn't even a proper criminal had killed that dear, inoffensive woman. But the worst shock was finding that instead of feeling grief-stricken, I felt as if a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders.

"The feeling of relief didn't go away after a few minutes, as I thought it would. It stayed, it grew. For a few days I thought myself a low kind of beast with no proper human feelings. Then I began to understand. I had let Aunt Agnes down for years — and myself — by always being so terrifically grateful."

"But my dear!" protested Penfold. "That was a very charming trait in your character."

"It wasn't!" The blunt contradiction made him sure that she was still suffering from shock. She went on: "I let it turn me spiritually into a poor relation, incessantly grateful and ever so anxious to please. Something the vicar had said to me three or four years ago put me on the right track. I loved Aunt Agnes very deeply. I shall love her all my life and shall go on wishing she were alive so that I could tell her that I wasn't fair to her nor to myself — nor to my husband!"

"But I have no complaint, Madge, except perhaps —"

"It started our marriage on the wrong foot. I'm ready to start again — I mean, from the beginning — if you are, Arthur. Are you?"

"My darling, how can you ask!"

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No, she did not want to be kissed — not just then. She was so clear on that point that he felt a little ruffled — it was so unlike her. Almost undutiful.

"We'll take each other on our merits," she said, and smiled. "I start at zero — you start one up. I mean — I want to tell you that I was — *stirred* — when you bought that book for poor Aunt Agnes. You'll say it was a trifle. But it pointed in the right direction, Arthur dear."

She was talking, he thought, a little incoherently, letting her tongue run away with her. But she was overwrought, poor child, and he would let it pass without comment.

"I need a change after what's happened," she went on. "We'll have a second honeymoon, Arthur! I want us to shut up the house for a month and stay in a nice hotel in London. You can go to the office, if you have to, but in the evenings we'll have fun."

"Fun" sounded a little ominous, but this was no time to dampen her spirits.

"A second honeymoon!" he echoed. "Just what we both need! I know of a quiet little place, one of the old City inns —"

"But I don't want a quiet little place! I want the Savoy or the Waldorf. I know it will cost a huge amount but — listen! I saw the solicitor the other day. He says it will be about eighteen months before probate is granted, but in the meantime his firm is lending me £500 — in a proper business way, of course. I want you to take 200 of that. More, if it isn't enough."

He would not take her money because, in the morning, she would modify her plans and they would not go to the Savoy. But they did go to the Savoy and he did take her money, though he earmarked funds to give it back to her when her "mad mood" had passed.

Strangely, he caught something of the mad mood himself. They were both comparatively new to theatre-going. And Madge discovered that, after the theatre, you could go to a cabaret. Indeed, there were remarkably few forms of entertainment in London which she failed to discover.

Most of the time he enjoyed himself, while in her company. She could be merry or quietly companionable — provocative sometimes — but never obedient. It was as if there had been some meaning in that high-falutin' nonsense she had talked about herself — as if the death of Aunt Agnes had released a coiled spring in her nature. The "second honeymoon" joke was taking on a queer kind of reality. To him it was a revolutionary conception of the relationship of husband and wife. But the month, he reminded himself, would pass. And the coiled spring would have uncoiled itself.

When he was apart from her, it seemed a very long month — and not an altogether respectable one. She kept expecting him to treat her as if he had never kissed her before. At

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the end of the office day, he missed his railway journey and found himself counting the days to be endured before he would slip back into the groove that had become second nature — his way of life, in the protection of which he had killed Mrs. Blagrove.

When the holiday was over they parted at the hotel, he for the office, she for their home. Sitting in the train that evening, he visualized Madge listening for his footstep on the gravel path, opening the door before he could reach it. It did not happen. He let himself in and stopped short in the hall. He smelled the new paint before his eye had taken it in.

The hall, the staircase, the dining-room, the drawing-room — new paint, new wallpaper! He wandered aghast from one to another. The Landseers had gone from the walls of the dining-room! The Holman Hunt in the drawing-room had been replaced with a modern original! Some of the furniture had been reupholstered, some banished, and there was a new carpet in the drawing-room.

When she came in twenty minutes later, he was still struggling with his anger.

"Well! D'you like it?" she asked eagerly. She was entreating his approval.

"My dear, I am too astonished to form any opinion. Did it not occur to you, Madge, even to consult me before making sweeping alterations in my house?"

"Is it your house, Arthur — or *our* house? Of course I oughtn't to have done it on my own, but I had to take a risk! I had the feeling that everything in the house was practically as it had been when your parents married."

"It was, indeed! But what was wrong with it?"

"We have to give ourselves every chance, Arthur — or we shall be slipping back into the old ways."

The last words rendered him speechless. Slipping back into the old ways was precisely what he desired. He could find no means of making her understand. They were in the dining-room. He strode to the sideboard. The tantalus was still there. He took out the whiskey decanter.

"Not whiskey for me," said Madge. "Gin and orange, please."

That was another shock. Never before had she taken a drink in the home, except during a party, when she would make a glass of sherry last the whole time. He hesitated, then began to mix the gin. She had turned herself into a different kind of woman and intended to stay that way. He was not angry now, only afraid.

"Let's drink to our future, Arthur."

"To our future!" And what sort of future? She no longer interpreted his wishes as her duties — she was compelling him to accept some give-and-take principle of her own. She expected her tastes to be consulted equally with his, and she demanded that he should woo her afresh for every caress.

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With a sense of discovery he remembered how he had sat alone in the drawing-room that night, wondering whether she had "run round to Dalehurst with that wretched book." Until he knew for certain, there was nothing for it but abject surrender.

"I'm afraid I've been a bit bearish over the decorations, darling. Sorry! Come and show me everything and I'll tell you how much I like it all."

She was sweetness itself whenever he made an effort to please her — but the effort had to be successful! Not that she required to be pleased all the time — she was as ready to give as to take. It emerged, however, that the month of madness at the Savoy, shorn of its expensive indulgence, was to be the blueprint for their married life — a kind of marriage which he had never contemplated and did not want.

Most evenings, in the train, he would decide to put his foot down. But when he got out of the train — you could just see the gables of Dalehurst from the arrival platform — other considerations would arise. So he would say nothing when he found a cocktail party in progress at home — nor when Madge was absent, at someone else's party — nor when she said she was sorry but she could never understand stories about business.

In June, five months after the Savoy holiday, he contrived to meet Gershaw as if by chance, when the latter was leaving his office for lunch, and enticed him to a drink.

"Madge seems to have got over her bereavement, but the fact is she has had a partial lapse of memory." He brought in an anonymous psychiatrist. "Now, I do remember that she went out after dinner saying that she had a message for Mrs. Gershaw from the vicar and she must go in person, because your telephone was out of order. Can you possibly tell me, old man, how long she was with you?"

"Oh, I say! That's a bit of a contract. My wife let her in — I was in the drawing-room, with the door open. I heard them chattering away in the hall and presently I butted in to ask your wife to have a drink, but she said she couldn't stay. I didn't notice the time. Call it three minutes — five, if you like. Best I can do! But I can tell you definitely she's wrong about our telephone. It was on the telephone that we heard that night about the — about Mrs. Blagrove."

That was nearly all that Penfold wanted to know.

"Was Madge carrying anything, Gershaw?"

"Don't think so — oh, yes, a book, loosely wrapped in newspaper. The rain had softened the paper and I offered her a satchel. But she found she could get it into the pocket of her raincoat — I remember pulling the flap over it for her."

So she would have had time to go to Dalehurst and get away, with a margin of minutes, before Dr. Delmore came on the scene. Penfold felt

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a profound unease and wished he had not tackled Gershaw. After all, there was no proof that she had gone to Dalehurst. The book was not necessarily the Ella Wheeler Wilcox book. And she might have gone to someone else with another message from the vicar. He decided to let the whole matter drop — and found that he could not. The riddle traveled home with him every evening and even intruded on the outward journey, so that his attention would wander from the morning paper.

As he could not shake it off, he tried to stare it out of countenance. Suppose Madge *did* go to Dalehurst and *did* know that her aunt was dead before Dr. Delmore stopped her in the road and told her. What did it matter? Was it to be supposed that she went through the open French window and in a very few minutes — never mind the shock! — saw something that was not seen by the highly trained detectives, something which told her that he had killed Aunt Agnes? Utterly absurd! Therefore, he would put it out of his mind.

He put it out for the better part of a fortnight's holiday in August, which they spent at Brighton. On the last day the riddle raised its head and he promptly struck at it with a new argument. Would a woman of Madge's character — would anyone but a degraded gun-moll — live with a man whom she believed to have killed a woman who was virtually her mother? She would not! Therefore, Madge had no secret weapon.

The obsession was beginning to exist in its own right, as something separate from his desire to change Madge back into a docile and obedient wife. It had an integrity of its own, with no fear outside itself. He did not believe that, if she had proof, she would have taken it to the police. The terror lay in an imagined moment, in which she would say: *I know you killed Aunt Agnes.* Being an imaginative terror, it was more consuming than a reasonable fear.

If she had known before Dr. Delmore had told her, why had she not raised the alarm herself? He could find a dozen contradictory answers. Sometimes in his sleep, and sometimes in a waking dream in the train coming home, he would play the part of Madge entering the room by the French window. "Auntie, I've brought you *The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox.*" No, because she would have seen at once that her aunt was dead. In the shock of the discovery she would have forgotten all about the book, which was in the pocket of her mackintosh.

She would have brought the book home.

That night, when Madge had gone to bed, he began his searching. In the house there were about 1000 books, some 800 of which had been bought by his parents. There were four sectional bookcases — an innovation of Madge's — scattered about the drawing-room. In the section devoted to poetry and novels there was no Ella Wheeler Wilcox anthology. It was not

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in the shelves in the morning-room. It had not fallen behind anything. He thought of Madge's mackintosh, which she very rarely wore, found it in the cupboard under the stairs, with the pockets empty.

He had to wait three days before he could be certain that Madge had an afternoon engagement. The strain of waiting preyed on his nerves. Then he came home by the earlier train and made a thorough search upstairs. Finally, he was reduced to telling Madge that he had mislaid a technical book urgently needed and, with her able guidance, searched the whole house, without result.

Given that the book was not in his house, where was it? In a week, he was again reconstructing the scene in which Madge was supposed to have entered Dalehurst by the French window. As she walked up the graveled path she took the book from her pocket. When she entered the room, she flung it from her. In which case it would have been stored with Mrs. Blagrove's furniture, pending probate.

He knew by experience that, for a fixed fee, the depository company would allow detailed examination of goods. On the following Monday he went to the depository. He had equipped himself with a typewritten letter, purporting to have been signed by Margaret Penfold, which told of one or two rare editions among the comparatively valueless books forming part of the goods deposited. Would they please allow a prospective purchaser to examine? As a prospective purchaser, Penfold necessarily adopted a name not his own.

The manager accepted the fee, assured him there would be no difficulty. But, unfortunately, as the goods were awaiting probate, he must obtain formal permission through the solicitor in the case. If it would be convenient to call at the same time on the following day —

Penfold said that it would be quite convenient, and escaped, thankful that he had given a false name.

The solicitor, who was ready to swear that there were no rare editions among Mrs. Blagrove's books, rang Mrs. Penfold during the afternoon to make sure. When Madge said she had never heard of any, he said that evidently some other property was concerned, that he was sorry she had been bothered, and that he hoped she was well. It seemed so trivial an incident that Madge did not mention it.

On Saturday morning, as the Penfolds were finishing breakfast, the housemaid brought a card: *Detective Inspector Rason, New Scotland Yard.*

The telephone conversation with Margaret Penfold made it obvious to the solicitor that the introductory letter to the depository company was a forgery. He reported the facts to Scotland Yard. The report was passed to the Department of Dead Ends, to which the Blagrove case had inevitably drifted.

The imposter had concerned himself with books, so Rason searched the

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Blagrove dossier for mention of books. With some difficulty he found an unpromising note at the end of a list of gruesome details concerning the settee . . . *under seat, misc. articles including newly purchased book: title, The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox. Checked local bookseller (Penting's). Two copies sold, morning, one to Mrs. Manfried, one to Mrs. Penfold (See Penfold, Margaret: Movements of).*

While waiting at the depository for the imposter who did not turn up, Rason inspected the furniture and effects removed from Dalehurst, eventually finding the Ella Wheeler Wilcox anthology which had been taken from the folds of the settee. He replaced it without feeling any wiser for the effort he had imposed on the warehouseman.

The routine of the Department, constructed by Rason himself, had a certain simplicity. When any object was offered or mentioned, one first checked the object itself. Then one checked the object in relation to the suspects. There were no suspects in this case, unless one counted the Penfolds — so Rason counted them. From the depository, he borrowed the girl who had shown Penfold to the manager's office, and stood her near Penfold's office at lunchtime.

"That's him!" cried the girl, when Penfold came out.

"Don't be silly!" protested Rason. "It can't be. This is only routine."

The girl, however, was quite positive — which presented Rason with a teaser. The only way of squeezing in Penfold as a suspect was to assume he was lying when he said he was in his own drawing-room between 5 and 6, the time of the murder. Nearly a year later he tries to work an elaborate deception on the depository people in order to be able to "inspect" some books, which couldn't have been there. How could all that help him to prove he didn't commit a murder, of which no one suspected him except Rason, who now had to, owing to his routine?

Better ask Penfold.

"Renbald's Depository!" he exclaimed when civilities had been exchanged in Penfold's dining-room. Penfold looked ghastly, which was not what Rason wanted. "It's all right, Mr. Penfold — it's only routine. We don't worry about the forged letter and the fake name. Told 'em you wanted to inspect some books. What did you really want? Tell me, and I can cross it off."

It was an unanswerable question. Penfold remembered the excuse he had used to induce Madge to search for the anthology.

"I did want to inspect the books, though I knew there were no first editions. The truth is, Inspector, I had lost a technical book of my own. I thought it might have got mixed up with Mrs. Blagrove's books —"

"But you could have got your wife to write you a real letter for that and you could have used your own name?"

"I did ask her. She was unwilling, because she convinced herself that

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the book couldn't possibly be there."

It was such an unrehearsed, knock-kneed tale that Rason was inclined to believe it.

"Perhaps I can help you," he grinned. "I've inspected those books. Was it called *The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox*?"

"*No!*" The emphasis was not lost on Rason.

"*The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox*," Rason was mouthing the words, "was found on the settee on which Mrs. Blagrove was killed!"

So Margaret *did* go to Dalehurst, thought Penfold.

"That does not concern me," he said. Playing for his own safety, he added: "The copy of that book which I bought never left this house, so far as I know."

"So *you* bought a copy of that book, Mr. Penfold?"

"I did. I intended to present it to Mrs. Blagrove on the following day, which was her birthday. Ella Wheeler Wilcox was her favorite author."

"Where did you buy it?"

"In London." He added: "At Waterloo Station, before taking the train which arrives here at five three."

Rason felt he was getting somewhere. The note in the dossier said that the book had been bought by Margaret Penfold, from the local bookseller.

"If you've no objection, I'd like to see what Mrs. Penfold has to say about this."

"Certainly! She will tell you that, at around 6 o'clock that night, she handled the copy I had bought and talked about it — in this house. But I won't have her bullied and frightened."

Penfold did not leave the room. He rang for the housemaid, but it was Madge herself who answered the bell.

"My dear, I'm afraid we have to talk about your poor Aunt Agnes," began Penfold. "Mr. Rason has informed me that, on the settee on which she was killed, there was a copy of *The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox*. I have —"

"Oh!" It was a quick little cry of dismay. "I think I can see what has happened. Arthur, I would like to speak to Mr. Rason alone. Please!"

She did go to Dalehurst — Penfold was certain now. If she had also picked up a clue to his guilt he must try to cope with it before the detective could build it up.

"I am sorry, Madge, but I really feel I have the right to be present."

"Very well, Arthur." There was a shrug in her voice. "Mr. Rason, on the morning of that day, I bought a copy of that book locally, at Penting's. I lunched with Mrs. Blagrove and gave her the book — not as a birthday present — we were jointly giving her a more elaborate present the next day.

"In the evening I reached home at 6. My husband had come home earlier than usual. He showed me a copy of *The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox* which he had bought in London for

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Aunt — for Mrs. Blagrove." She paused before adding: "I was very greatly surprised — I have to say it! — I thought that my husband was not the sort of man who — who would ever think of doing a kindly little act like that. I did him an injustice, and was ashamed. I was above all anxious not to spoil the whole thing by telling him I had forestalled him. I intended to tell Mrs. Blagrove what had happened and ask her to help me in a harmless fraud. I took the book from my husband and, of course, I had to get rid of it, as Mrs. Blagrove would not want two copies. I had to go out that night to deliver a message to a neighbor, Mrs. Gershaw. I went on to a Mrs. Manfried, who was also an Ella Wheeler Wilcox fan, and offered her the book. But she had also bought a copy that morning. The book was published that day and I suppose all the real fans bought it at once. On the way back, Dr. Delmore told me the news and I forgot the book. I found it in my raincoat a few days later. I dropped the book in the croquet box, under the mallets. It may still be there. I'll show you."

"Don't bother on my account, Mrs. Penfold. I'm glad it's all cleared up," said Rason untruthfully. He had been quite hopeful when he thought he had cornered Penfold over the books. Journey from London for nothing!

"I wish my wife had told me at the time — it wouldn't have hurt my feelings," said Penfold, when Madge was out of earshot. "Is it too early for a drink of something, Inspector?"

"Too early for me, thanks. I —"

Madge burst in.

"Here it is!" The newspaper on which the rain had fallen was crinkled and torn. "Just as I pulled it out of my raincoat!"

"Well, I can put it on record that I've seen it!" said Rason, as he unwrapped the newspaper. "Cupids, eh! Same as the one I saw at the depository. *The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox!*" With hardly a change of tone, he went on:

"Now let's get this book business straightened out. At lunchtime, Mrs. Penfold, you gave Mrs. Blagrove a copy of this book? So the copy you gave her would still be in her possession at 5:03 — when Mr. Penfold arrived at the station here? Around 6, Mr. Penfold shows you this copy I've now got in my hand — and you take charge of it?"

"Correct!" cut in Penfold, and was echoed by Margaret.

"Somewhere between 5:03 and 6" — Rason turned from Margaret to her husband — "you picked up the *wrong copy*, Penfold! Look here!"

He opened the book and pointed: *To dear Aunt Agnes With love from Madge.*

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WITHOUT BENEFIT OF JURY

by PETER B. KYNE

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON AT THE 70 Ranch and, as per his custom, Dad Tully, the proprietor, had invited me out on his veranda for the postprandial cocktail to be served by his Chinese man of all work, Zing. When the late afternoon sun casts its mellow lights across Dad's 40,000-acre meadow and the blue haze rests on the hills beyond, the old cattleman likes to sip his drink and gaze meditatively over his little empire. At such times he is apt to grow reminiscent.

A man came riding across the meadow, and as he swung into the road that led past the house to the barns, he waved a friendly salute to Dad Tully, who answered in kind. The man was Tip McGonnigle, Dad's ranch superintendent, and he had a day-old Hereford calf across the saddle in front of him.

"Tip has an orphan calf," Dad remarked. "Reckon I've lost a heifer. Well, Tip will slip the little feller to a cow that's just lost her own calf, although with the best smooth steers bringin' five an' a half at the stockyards, I'll be shot if I can see any sense in Tip McGonnigle foolin' with that runt calf."

"He may be worth seven cents two years from now," I suggested.

Dad nodded. "An' two years ain't scarcely nothin' in Tip McGonnigle's life. *Ai di mi!* This world is full o' square pegs in round holes, which the sight o' Tip McGonnigle reminds me o' the fact. Now, there's Tip, as good a cowman as ever forked a colt, happy as a pup with a feather duster workin' for me at $150 a month, when the Lord A'mighty just naturally organized him to be a chief o' detectives.

"He *would* be the one to find that orphan calf, o' course. I might have known it. Any other rider in my employ would have passed that dyin' heifer at half a mile an' never noticed anythin' strange about the way she was stretched out. An' if he had noticed it he'd have been too dog-gone indifferent to my interests to do anythin' about it.

"I reckon that's why Tip's the super o' the 70 Ranch. Good man, Tip. Just after he come back from the war sixteen year ago he done somethin' that made me so proud o' him I had myself examined for a $25,000 life insurance policy an' made Tip the beneficiary. So when I set back from the game — an' it oughtn't to be long now — Tip'll be fixed to be his own man."

"What did Tip McGonnigle do to make you so proud of him?" I inquired.

"Just about the finest job o' detective work ever pulled off anywhere,

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any time, by anybody." Dad settled himself in his chair, and I knew the tale was coming.

There was two o' the McGonnigle boys (Dad continued). Local boys, both of them. Jeff was five year younger than Tip and the same sort o' solid, dependable person. They was orphaned when they was fourteen, an' I give Tip a ridin' job at 50 a month, an' Jeff went on my pay roll at fifteen, doin' odd chores around the place. Tip, bein' the oldest, naturally sort o' looks after Jeff until he's eighteen, after which he allows Jeff is a man an' can roll his own hoop.

Well, as I said, they're both right good boys an' I advance 'em as they merit it an' opportunity occurs, an' we're all happy until the Great War breaks out. Jeff an' Tip are anxious to go, but the rest o' my help sort o' went first, not havin' no particular loyalty to me, so Jeff an' Tip stay on, allowin' to get me through the hayin' season. Then they plan to go down to the city an' enlist in the same outfit.

But they reckon without the draft law, which reaches in an' snatches Jeff out of our midst, which Jeff, like a true cow waddy, views service in the infantry as somethin' scandalous, he never havin' walked a mile in his life if there was a horse to ride. So he induces the draft board to send him to the navy, an' the navy takes him an' shoots him to a naval trainin' station on Lake Michigan, near Chicago, which is how come Jeff sees a big city for the first time in his whole life.

Chicago is as far as Jeff gets in the Great War, an' there he meets a girl an' sets down to do some tall thinkin' about his future. He knows he's got his old job back with me when the war is over, but if he comes back he's got to part with that girl in Chicago, because he can't support no Chicago girl on a puncher's pay.

No, sir, Jeff's just naturally got to get a worth-while job in Chicago, so when Uncle Sam finally lets go o' him, Jeff takes the examination for a policeman in Chicago, passes an' gets on the force. Followin' a few months' schoolin' as a rookie, he gets assigned to a beat out in a Chicago suburb.

Meanwhile, the second draft call gets Tip, so off Tip goes to the field artillery, figgerin' he'll have a horse to ride, which he don't because when the war's over in France Tip's outfit is so shy o' horses the men are pullin' the guns with ropes, an' Tip walks a couple o' hundred miles up into Germany.

O' course Jeff writes Tip up on the Rhine that he's on the Chicago police force an' for Tip to stop off in Chicago on his way home from the war an' visit with him an' meet his girl. Tip don't get sent home until early summer o' 1919, an' then he don't get no chance to stop off to visit Jeff on account his regiment comes straight through to Camp Lewis, near Tacoma, an' is there demobilized, an' Tip comes straight back to the 70 Ranch an' goes on my pay roll again. An' he ain't been back a month till he gets a

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telegram from the chief o' police o' Chicago, informin' him that Jeff has been killed by a bandit in discharge o' his duty, an' what'll they do with the body?

That sure was a hard blow for Tip McGonnigle. He can't afford to go to Chicago an' bring Jeff's body home, an' to make matters worse, he's sick with flu at the time. So I wire some money to Jeff's girl an' she has him buried in the National Cemetery at Ford Sheridan, an' when Tip gets out o' bed he says nothin' but just forks his horse an' life rolls on.

The chief o' police writes Tip how Jeff gets killed. It seems that out in the suburb where Jeff has his beat there's a neighborhood jeweler — at least, that's what the sign on his window says, although mostly he sells alarm clocks an' dollar watches an' spectacles an' does a little mendin' an' some trade in weddin' rings. But he's a right scary old gent an' gets obsessed with the notion that because he's a jeweler some criminal may get the notion he carries a fortune in unset stones an' rob an' maybe kill him.

Most o' his business is done at night — he closes up shop at 10 o'clock. I reckon maybe Jeff had called on this jeweler to get a price on weddin' or engagement rings an', bein' a stranger in Chicago an' one o' them neighborly persons, he gets acquainted with the old jeweler an' discovers the latter is in mortal fear o' bandits. So good-hearted Jeff makes it his business, while patrollin' his beat, to arrive at the jeweler's shop at 10 o'clock every night an' walk with the scared little cuss six blocks to the man's home, which lies in Jeff's territory.

It seems that on the night he's killed he's walkin' home with the little jeweler an' they come to a whole city block that ain't been built up. There's a couple o' scrubby trees on it an' a lot o' tall grass an' weeds. The sidewalk runs all around all four sides of it, an' on the night in question a soft rain is fallin' an' one o' the arc lights on the side along which Jeff an' the jeweler are passin' has gone out.

So the layout's more or less murky, when Jeff an' his friend come up on a roadster standin' by the curb, with the engine runnin' an' the lights shinin', an' a man standin' on the sidewalk workin' away at somethin' inside the body o' the car. Jeff is on the outside o' the sidewalk where the side glow from the car's lamps shows him up, which the light entirely misses the jeweler, who's walkin' close to the inside.

"Hello, neighbor!" says Jeff. "You in trouble with your car? Want any help?"

The man fussin' with the car looks up, turns, sees a policeman walkin' toward him an' cracks down on him twice with a pistol. Both bullets reach Jeff's heart, an' the killer jumps into his car an' beats it without ever havin' seen the jeweler. An' then that jeweler gets up some courage. He runs to Jeff, grabs Jeff's .38 police-special revolver from the holster an' fires two shots at the car. But it don't stop, an' the jeweler runs down to a drug store

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two blocks away an' calls up the police.

When the patrol an' ambulance arrive, he's standin' over Jeff's body with a pistol an' two chambers discharged, an' he has two holes in him, an' when they take the bullets out o' the body it's discovered they're .38's. So the police arrest the jeweler, charge him with murderin' Jeff, in spite o' the story he tells (which there's nobody to back up his yarn of a mysterious killer who disappears in the dark leavin' no trail). The chief o' police, in his letter to Tip, allows he has the murderer, that he'll prove the motive, an' Tip can rely on it his brother's murderer is practically in the chair right now.

Tip gives a sad contemptuous smile when he reads me that letter. "Which it sure beats my time, Dad," he says, "how a man as dumb as this feller can rise to be chief o' police."

Well, sir, Tip's right about it. To begin, Jeff's so big that if that little jeweler had tried to get his gun away from him, Jeff would have held him with one hand an' spanked him with the other. Then, too, Jeff has nothin' for the jeweler to steal. The police can't work up a motive, an' the grand jury prefers to believe the jeweler's story, so they send him back to his alarm clocks an' the murder o' Patrolman Jefferson T. McGonnigle remains one o' the hundreds of unsolved crimes in Chicago.

Two years pass, an' I'm shippin' a trainload o' choice feeders to the Chicago stockyards, so I sent Tip McGonnigle along in charge o' the crew to look after the cattle en route. An' after Tip's delivered the feeders, an' seen 'em weighed, he sends the rest o' the boys back home an' allows he'll prowl around Chicago some an' see can he pick up a clue to whoever killed his brother Jeff. In particular, he feels in honor bound to call on the jeweler an' thank him for his brave effort to halt the killer.

Well, Tip gets the story from the jeweler, who closes up shop long enough to climb in a taxicab with Tip an' run him down to the exact spot where Jeff was killed.

"Thanks," says Tip. "This sure is a long, cold trail to puzzle out, an' as you never seen the killer's face or got the number o' his car, I reckon if I ever turn him up I can't convict him unless he confesses. However, there ain't no law to prevent me from settin' down here on the curb, where Jeff starts west, an' thinkin' things over a mite."

So the jeweler went back to his shop, an' Tip set down an' tried to reconstruct the killin' in his mind, an', naturally, the first question that occurs to him is: What was this killer doin' here in his car? The car wasn't broke down, because the motor was runnin' an' the lights were burnin' — an' after rubbin' Jeff out the skunk jumped in an' beat it at top speed.

The arc light at yonder corner was burned out an' it was plumb dark here. That killer had a reason for stoppin' in a dark spot, an' the reason was, he was doin' somethin' he didn't want folks to see. Whatever he was

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doin' was sinful an' he felt guilty about it because when Jeff spoke to him maybe he didn't understand that Jeff meant to help him. All he seen, in the dim light o' them auto lamps, was a belted cop comin' toward him; he felt he couldn't afford to be arrested, so he ups an' kills Jeff.

Now, this killer was standin' on the sidewalk, leanin' into the front o' his car, fussin' with somethin' there, accordin' to the jeweler. Was that somethin' stolen property? It must have been. Then, if so, was he loadin' it into his car here when Jeff interrupted him? It seems reasonable to think he was.

An' yet, what could he load out of a vacant city square? Probably somethin' a confederate had left there for him. An' it couldn't have been anythin' very big, because he had it either on the seat beside him or in the passenger side o' the drivin' compartment. An' there was plenty o' room left for him to jump in there in a hurry an' drive away.

"Maybe he didn't steal nothin' out o' this square," Tip says to himself. "Maybe nobody left anythin' here for him to pick up. Maybe he brought it here himself in his roadster, an' whatever he had it in was too bulky an' conspicuous, so he carried it out into the weeds yonder to transfer it to somethin' smaller an' less conspicuous."

So Tip gets up an' walks out into the weeds, but all he finds is a crate such as farmers ship chickens to market in, a broken-down rusty cookstove, a rusty spring an' maybe two dozen tin cans.

"Folks sure will make a public dump out of a vacant lot if the police ain't on hand to stop 'em," says Tip to himself, an' is still further convinced o' this dirty streak in human nature when he observes a rusty old front fender of a car, a coffeepot with a hole burned in the bottom an' a rubber boot that has seen better days. What more junk he might have found in them tall dry weeds an' grasses we'll never know, because Tip, bein' a cow-country man, reasoned like one regardin' that junk — an' his line o' reasonin' brought him up standin'.

"All this here is plain dump material — all but the chicken crate. Nothin' else had value when it was dumped here, but this here's a good stout chicken crate. *How come this good chicken crate here?* If anybody in the neighborhood bought chickens by the crate, he bought 'em from a wholesaler who furnished the crate — an' charged him for the crate, givin' him a correspondin' credit when the empty crate should be returned.

"Yes, sir, Tip McGonnigle, a wholesale chicken buyer wouldn't have tossed this crate worth two to three dollars out here in these weeds. He'd take it back an' get credit for it on his bill or the value of the crate in cash. Which leads me to the conclusion that whoever hove this crate out here had no rebate comin' if he returned it to the place he got it,

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which conclusion gives rise to a further conclusion: to wit, *that whoever had this crate in his possession last stole it!*

"Now, the question before the house is: Was this crate full o' chickens when he stole it, or was it empty? And the answer to that, Mr. McGonnigle, is that it was full; otherwise, it wouldn't have been stolen an' then thrown away."

Tip now observes the crate from all angles, an' discovers that it is black an' weather-stained, provin' it might have been lyin' in that lot for two years at least. Also, weeds had growed up through the bottom slats an' over the top slats, which is another proof that it has been there not less than a year. Also, the two top slats have been pulled off, an' one of 'em broken. Both slats are lyin' in the weeds beside the crate.

Tip sets down on the crate an' says to himself: "Señor McGonnigle, let us assume that this crate, loaded with chickens, was stolen by a man who drove a roadster. A crate of live chickens lashed on the back of a roadster, at 10:30 P.M. on a rainy night, would be conspicuous, would it not, Mr. McGonnigle? It would, Mr. Bones, an' what's more, the crate wouldn't ride well on that turtle deck. Right, Mr. McGonnigle.

"However, this chicken thief had no other means o' transportation, so he had to take a chance. All he could do in the circumstances was to reduce that risk to the minimum, which would seem to indicate that he stole the said chickens at a point not far from here, dashed over to this dark vacant square, tore open the crate, transferred his chickens to gunny sacks — an' carried them back to his car, where he could stow them in small compass, leavin' the empty crate where he dropped it. An' here it is still.

"While he was busy stowin' the last sack o' chickens in his car Jeff happened by, an' in his embarrassment this thief bumped off my only brother. However, that jeweler didn't say anythin' about pullets cluckin' or roosters crowin' in that car. O' course not! You pick up any chicken in the pitch-darkness an' stuff him into a sack an' he'll snuggle down quiet."

So Tip heaves himself up off that chicken crate, pulls the crate out o' the weeds an' examines it. A shippin' tag wired to the top slat indicated the crate had been shipped to a certain downtown commission house by express. The crate bore a number — Number 5 — an' on one o' the slats was stenciled in black letters:

When Empty Return to
J. P. Eccles
Danville, Indiana

Tip McGonnigle wrote down the name an' address o' the commission firm, the number o' the crate an' the name o' the farmer in Indiana. Then he dropped the crate back in the weeds an' the next mornin' took a train to Danville, Indiana, an' looked up J. P. Eccles. It developed that the Eccles man was a farmer an' a large chicken raiser, an' that it was his

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habit to make regular shipments o' poultry to that Chicago commission house. An' it happened, too, that he was a methodical old codger who kept accurate records o' his shipments an' cash received an' paid out.

Tip figured that if Eccles had sent a crate o' chickens to Chicago it must have arrived a day or two before Jeff was killed, so they looked it up; an' sure enough, Crate Number 5, containin' a dozen an' a half fat hens, had been shipped three days before Jeff's death. But what was more interestin' was the fact that the crate they'd been shipped in had never been returned by the commission house, an' Eccles remembered — an' proved it by an entry — that two weeks later the commission house had remitted him $3 in lieu o' the lost crate.

Back to Chicago went Tip McGonnigle. In the office o' the commission house he verifies the fact that the crate o' chickens from Eccles was duly received an' a check for $3 sent Eccles in lieu o' the lost crate. Then Tip wants to know the name o' the butcher or restaurant man they'd sold them hens to, an' in less'n an hour he discovered that the crate o' fat hens in question had been sold to a German butcher named August Schultz, out in the suburbs where Jeff used to patrol his beat.

O' course Tip called next on August Schultz. Herr Schultz recalled having had a crate of a dozen an' a half fat hens stolen out o' his back yard a year or two back. He couldn't remember the exact date but he had reported the theft to the local police station as soon as he discovered it next mornin'.

Tip hiked over to the local police station an' asked to see the complaint blotter for the day after the killin', an' sure enough, there was the record o' Schultz's report o' the theft o' the chickens received by the desk sergeant not quite twelve hours after Jeff was murdered.

The trail was still as cold as ever, but Tip McGonnigle did some more thinkin', with the result that he buys him a map o' that Chicago suburb an' lays out a square mile o' territory, with the spot where his brother'd been killed as the exact center o' this area.

Tip reasoned that the skunk that'd stole them chickens an' killed his brother had one o' four reasons for stealin' them. Either he wanted to get a start in the chicken-raisin' business cheap, or he wanted chickens to eat, or he wanted to bootleg them to some butcher or restaurant proprietor as a unit, or he wanted to sell them retail himself an' make 100 per cent profit on goods that'd cost him nothin'.

Tip eliminated the first reason, because he knew the thief ought to know that a farmer never ships fat hens to market unless they're old an' have quit layin'. Even a dumb chicken thief should know them fat old hens wasn't the sort o' breedin' stock to lay in.

So it seemed like he wanted to give a chicken dinner to himself. But second consideration knocked that out. A man low enough to steal a

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crate o' chickens an' kill a friendly cop to avoid gettin' caught at it wouldn't be generous enough to serve up a dozen an' a half fat hens to his friends, anyhow. Considerin' his third alternative, Tip decides this chicken thief is a coward; hence he won't have the nerve to steal a crate o' chickens for the purpose o' bootleggin' them in bulk, because he'd be afraid he might get caught at it.

So only the fourth consideration seemed worth while. The feller was runnin' either a neighborhood restaurant or a butcher shop, an' Tip couldn't see how any restaurant man in his senses would want live birds around him. Lastly, a butcher wouldn't arouse no suspicion in anybody who saw a crate o' live chickens in his place o' business, because it's natural for a butcher to kill an' dress critters he aims to sell retail.

So Tip commenced sniffin' around butcher shops, an' at the end of a week he'd eliminated every butcher shop in the area except three, an' o' the three he suspicions most a foreigner by the name o' Choyniski, who runs a little shop just inside Tip's huntin' area an' employs no help. His place is dirty an' full o' flies, with meat scraps an' blood all over the sawdust, an' Choyniski is dirty, too, an' mean-lookin' an' unpleasant.

The next day Tip ditches his cowpuncher garments, buys himself a new suit o' store clothes an' a hat that won't create any attention, calls on Choyniski, represents himself as an automobile salesman an' 'lows as how he'd like to sell Brother Choyniski a new car.

Choyniski won't entertain the idea. He informs Tip he does a cash-an'-carry business, so he don't need a car to make deliveries, an' he ain't interested.

"But surely," says Tip, "you must use a car to go downtown to the wholesale district for your supplies o' meat an' fowl."

"Nix," says Choyniski. "They deliver it here to me. Now, get out. I got no time to talk to you, salesman. Ain't I told you I'm busy?"

"But couldn't you use a pleasure car, Mr. Choyniski? Don't you hone to take your wife an' family out for a ride in the country on Sundays an' holidays?"

"I tell you I don't want a car!" Choyniski yells at Tip, mighty angry now. "I can't drive a car. I never owned a car. I never want to own one. Now, get out!" An' he come out from behind his counter with a cleaver in his hand.

So Tip apologizes an' backs out, an' it's all he can do to keep from bellin' like a foxhound when he has a coon treed. However, he requires some information, an' he decides that if there's anybody in a neighborhood that knows everythin' about other people's business it's the local barber. An' Tip has observed a barber shop in the block.

In goes Tip McGonnigle an' orders a shave, a haircut an' a shampoo, an' while the barber works on him Tip says: "What kind of a man is this

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here feller Choyniski, the butcher?"

"I don't know him an' I don't want to know him," says the barber. "I don't want his trade. He's too dirty."

"Tried to sell him a new car," Tip complains, "but couldn't make the grade. What sort o' car does he drive?"

"I don't know," says the barber. "In fact, I don't think he has a car. Yes, come to think of it, he did have a car, an' I think it was a roadster. But I haven't seen it for a long time."

When the barber finishes with Tip, that patient cowboy makes a trip to the office o' the motor-vehicle license bureau o' the sovereign state of Illinois, an' before he comes away he knows that this Choyniski owned a secondhand roadster at the time Jeff was killed an' that two days later he sold it to a man named Murphy who lived over near the stockyards.

That night Tip calls on the man Murphy, an' Murphy says he bought the car from Choyniski after he'd seen it advertised in the paper, an' that he paid Choyniski $50 for it. Choyniski wanted 75 but the turtle deck was missin', an' Murphy got it for 50.

The followin' mornin' bein' Sunday, Tip McGonnigle wends his way back to Choyniski's butcher shop an' prowls around it. It's on an alley an' Tip slips down there, an' in the yard back o' the butcher shop he sees a little hip-roofed wooden shed that looks as if it might have been built for a garage.

There's an old speedometer cable, chains, an old inner tube an' a can with some cup grease in it — just enough evidence to prove that once an automobile has been kept there. Across the rear o' the garage a platform o' boards to the uprights in the wall close to this little loft four cleats are nailed, formin' a ladder so a person can climb up onto the junk loft; so Tip McGonnigle climbs up an' turns a flashlight on and sees some rounded object pushed far back an' covered with a piece o' burlap, so he drags off the burlap an' finds — the turtle deck of a roadster *with two bullet holes in it!*

"Bully for you, old jeweler!" Tip says to himself. "That car was disappearin' in the dark an' you were scared to death, but you grabbed poor Jeff's gun an' fired two shots after it. Well, Jeff, little brother, nothin' now remains but to prove my case on the evidence, get a confession from this Choyniski, make good with you — an' go back to the 70 Ranch."

Pendin' the trial an' conviction o' Choyniski, Tip goes back to his hotel an' does some more heavy thinkin'. There ain't no doubt in his mind but that he's got his finger on Jeff's murderer, but he ain't so sure he can make a jury believe it. Maybe the police can't prove he ever owned a pistol.

Here Tip has another bright thought. This Choyniski is the sort o' person that don't throw nothin' away unless he has to. He'd remove the turtle deck o' his roadster when he found the two bullet holes in it, because that was bad medicine, an' he was too smart to try to get rid o' that evidence until he sold the car. Also, if the police found him with a car an'

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no turtle deck to it, they'd suspect the turtle deck had been removed because it had bullet holes in it.

So Choyniski sells the car pronto, minus this bullet-riddled equipment, which he hides up in the garage loft, aimin' perhaps to get rid of it later. However, when the days pass an' he ain't questioned by the police he figures he's safe, an' in all probability forgets about the turtle deck stored in the garage loft. He ain't a man to waste anythin', so in all probability he still has the pistol, an' Tip decides he keeps it on a shelf under his meat counter, ready for use in case a bandit comes in to rob his cash register or a cop comes in to arrest him for murder.

"No, Mr. McGonnigle," says Tip to himself, "I can't chance a jury."

The followin' evenin' about 7 o'clock (this Choyniski person keeps his shop open till 8) Tip arrives in the neighborhood. He goes in the public telephone booth in the drug store a block from Choyniski's shop, calls up the Central Police Station an' asks for the chief detective. In ten minutes, he's told his tale.

"Great work!" says this person. "Are you a private detective?"

"No, sir," says Tip, "I just happen to be a man born with hoss sense, an' I had a personal interest in this killin'. How soon can you send a man out to arrest this here skunk?"

"I'll have a plain-clothes man make the pinch in ten minutes."

"O' course," says Tip, "my testimony in this matter won't be no good because I ain't official, but that chicken crate is still in the vacant square an' you can start from there, officially, an' foller the same trail I follered an' get the same results, at the same time buildin' up a reputation for yourself. An' by the way, instruct your man when he makes the arrest to say to Choyniski: 'Choyniski, I arrest you for the murder o' Patrolman Jefferson McGonnigle. I been on your trail two years!' That'll scare him so you'll get a confession!"

The minute Tip's out o' that drug store he hurries up the street an' comes dashin' into Choyniski's butcher shop. "I just been held up!" he yells. "The stick-up man run down the alley. Gimme your pistol quick, mister, an' I'll get the skunk."

Now, there's somethin' about a human bein', particularly o' the lower classes, that when you give him a sudden quick command like you meant to be obeyed, he obeys first an' thinks it over afterward. Without a word Choyniski produces a pistol from under his counter, an' Tip grabs it an' runs out the rear door into the dark alley. He's back in five minutes, claimin' the bandit's outrun him, an' he hands Choyniski back his gun, thanks him an' goes out.

It ain't ten minutes till a police car slides up to the curb. From across the street Tip McGonnigle, who's never took his glance off the interior o' that butcher shop, strolls over in time to see a cop get out o' the car an' enter Choyniski's place o' business; he sees the cop flip back the lapel o' his coat an' say somethin' — an' he sees Choy-

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niski's arm dip below the counter an' come up with a pistol. Right across the meat counter he blazes away at the copper — six times — an' the cop jumps back, pulls *his* gun an' empties it into Choyniski!

Tip McGonnigle walks calmly in on the scene, looks over the counter an' sees his brother's murderer lyin' in the sawdust. Then he turns to the cop an' says: "I congratulate you, sir."

The cop's whiter'n chalk. "I wonder if he hit me," he says. "I don't feel like I been hit but he was shootin' at three-foot range an' how could he miss?"

"The best authorities all agree," says Tip McGonnigle, "that an expert pistol shot, armed with a gun loaded with blank ca'tridges, can't even commit suicide. This killer leads from fright, an' as I figgered he'd go for his gun the second you told him he was wanted for murder, just the same as he did when my innocent brother come up on him loadin' stolen chickens in his car, I took the precaution to see to it that when he pulled an' squeezed it would be just a case o' love's labor lost." An' he explains the racket he works on Choyniski.

"But suppose he'd discovered the substitution an' reloaded."

"I stood across the street an' watched to see if he would. If he had, I'd have been in the doorway with my gun out the second you showed your shield, an' the instant his hand went under the counter I'd have busted him in the right shoulder. Me, when I shoot at somethin' at twenty feet, I hit it."

Then Tip takes off his hat an' scratches his head an' grins. "It looks to me, neighbor, as how this killer sort o' confessed! Consequently, justice has had her day in court."

"He did — six times. They told me to take him in for an old murder. Who did he kill?"

"My kid brother — two years ago. Your commandin' officer in the Central Bureau will tell you the details, an' your side-kicker settin' out in the car is your witness that this skunk resisted arrest an' you killed him in self-defense. Me, I never did crave publicity, but I had to see this man dead before I started home, so with your kind permission I'll be startin' now. An' if I was you, I wouldn't say nothin' about them blank ca'tridges. The news won't help you none toward promotion."

An' liftin' his sombrero most polite, Tip McGonnigle went away from there an' come straight home to me with the tale. After thinkin' the proposition over, I come to the conclusion that Tip McGonnigle has practically all o' the points of intelligence noticeable on a mule, an' as my super at the time wasn't young enough for the job, I retired him an' give the job to Tip.

"Dang that Zing's gizzard, I'll have to fire him yet! Seems like he never can put enough bitters in these here alfalfa cocktails."

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Lord Dunsany has to his glorious credit more than 50 volumes of fiction, drama, poetry, and memoirs, but we seriously doubt if any one of these 50 books contains a more ingenious tale than the one we now give you. "The Speech" is a perfect gem of a short-short story, and we predict that it will be an anthology favorite for the next century of crime writing. We doff our detectival derby to the great Irish litterateur.

THE SPEECH

by LORD DUNSANY

"CRIME," SAID THE OLD JOURNALIST one night at his club. "One reads a good deal about violence nowadays; but I never read of a crime that would make a story like the one that there was when I was young. *That* would have made a story. But it was all hushed up."

"No doubt for some good reason," a younger journalist said.

"Yes," said the old journalist. "It had to be. They were extremely careful not to disturb the peace of Europe in those days. That, you see, was what the crime was about. There was a young man, scarcely remembered now, brilliant though he was — the Honorable Peter Minch. His old father you would never have heard of. A totally obscure old peer, Lord Inchingthwaite. But people heard of Peter Minch in his time. He was an M.P. and the coming man of the Opposition, one of those coming men that you never hear any more of.

"At the time that I tell about, he was going to make a speech in the House. Things had been simmering for some time. What this young fellow was going to say just at that time wasn't going to help the peace of Europe at all. What he was going to say would have prodded Austria pretty hard; and, if Germany had supported her in what would have been quite justifiable resentment, Russia would not have liked it, and the fat would have been in the fire. But there was no stopping Minch. He was a bit of a firebrand. The government couldn't stop him, of course. And as for the Opposition, he was their fancy man, and they were probably thinking more of how it would embarrass the government than how it would annoy the Austrians."

And then (the old journalist went on) the extraordinary thing happened. A man walked into the central office of Minch's party, without giving his name, and said quite clearly that he had sure information that was not exactly a message, and must not be taken as a threat but only a warn-

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ing, that that speech would never be made.

"What do you mean?" said the Chairman of the Party.

"I mean," said the man, "that there is an organization with which I have nothing to do, nothing whatever, who are determined to stop that speech, and who are powerful enough to do what they threaten. It is not I that threaten. I came to warn you."

"Do you mean," said the Chairman, "that they are going to use force?"

"They will use whatever is necessary," said the stranger. "We — that is, *they* — consider war to be the greater evil."

"War?" said the Chairman. "Who says we are making war?"

"Their information," said the stranger, "is that what Mr. Minch is going to say just at this time will bring war nearer. They are well-informed, and they have told me they are convinced that causing the death of one man is preferable to the risk of disturbing the peace of Europe."

Well, as politely as possible, the Chairman told him to go to hell. And as the man left, he said, "That speech will not be delivered. Under no circumstances will it be, in the House."

The Opposition told Scotland Yard. And *they* took the matter up at once, and assured the Chairman of the Party that the entire police force of the metropolis would be available. Police protection on an enormous scale was given to Minch at once.

I think Scotland Yard must have known more than they ever told about the organization that was making that threat, because they said at once that the man that had called on the Chairman of the Party would have been a man named Hosken. And that's who he turned out to be. The Chairman asked them then if they would arrest him. But the chief inspector said: Better not — better leave him at large, and he might give them more information. And he did.

The Chairman of the Party was sitting in his office with a burden removed from his mind, for he felt that the police had everything well in hand, when in walked this extraordinary man again. They let him come in, because they wanted to hear what the fellow had to say. They addressed him by his name this time, and I think it gave the Chairman a little childish pleasure to imply by doing so that they knew all about him.

"Well, Mr. Hosken," said the Chairman, "is there anything more that you wished to tell us?"

A faint smile from Hosken greeted the use of his name. And then he said, "Only to say that all those policemen will not enable Mr. Minch to make that speech and start a debate in Parliament, while things are as they are just now abroad."

"If Mr. Minch desires to speak in the House, as he has every right to do, he will certainly do so," said the Chairman.

"I have come to say," said Hosken, "that if he will put it off, so as to give things time to simmer down, the

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powerful organization with which a friend of mine is in touch will take no action."

"If you mean by 'things' the state of affairs in Europe, we are not concerned with them. No one in Europe can deny us free speech," said the Chairman.

"It would be an open defiance," said Hosken, "and would lead to war."

"You must understand," the Chairman said to Hosken, "that we cannot tolerate any more blackmail."

"Certainly, sir," said Hosken. "Only there will be no speech in Parliament by Mr. Minch for at least a week. And, if you stop him peacefully, there will be no need for violence."

Then he smiled and walked out.

Well, that's how things were (went on the old journalist) — tension rather acute, and this fiery young man going to start a debate in the House that would put all the fat in the fire, and perhaps set it overflowing and scalding all Europe, and a powerful organization of blackmailers — for they were nothing less — determined that that debate should never take place, and that one man's murder was nothing compared to war. And against the black-mailing gang was practically the whole of the police force of the metropolis. I needn't go into the precautions taken by the police. They took them all. Minch was constantly under observation by at least two of them. I doubt if anyone was ever more watched in London.

They soon ran Hosken down, but did not arrest him. All they did was to keep him under observation. I fancy they thought that he would be more useful to them that way.

On a Wednesday morning everything was all ready. Minch was going to speak at 7 that evening. His whole family were going to be there, his old father in the Peers' Gallery, and all the rest of his family in the Ladies' Gallery. The police had a cab for Minch which was entirely bulletproof, even to windows of plate glass that was over an inch thick.

Well, the precautions were more than would have been taken for moving bullion from the Bank of England. They asked Minch to be at the House by 3 o'clock.

As he and his police escort arrived, a messenger boy handed a note to the inspector in charge of the guard. He opened it and saw an anonymous note, saying: *Mr. Minch will not make that speech today.* He smiled, because once inside the precincts of the House of Parliament murder was quite impossible.

Minch's family were to arrive at half past 6. At 3 o'clock, a dull debate opened. And yet the tension was electric, for everyone present knew the threat of the gang. The dignity of Parliament was at stake, and most of the members, even on the side to which Minch was going to cause so much trouble, put that first. Slowly the tension heightened, as the hands of the clock moved round to 4.

And in that heightened tension everyone seemed to know what

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everyone else was thinking. They knew when any speaker was intending to be funny, and all laughed quickly and nervously, even before the little joke came.

And then, at five minutes past 4, a note for Mr. Minch was handed by a policeman to the inspector, who passed it to the segeant-at-arms, who went into the chamber and gave it to Minch. Minch opened it and turned white.

"My father is dead," he said to a member beside him. "He's been murdered."

"I am terribly sorry," said the other man. "What happened?"

Minch handed the note to him. His father had been shot dead in his house. The murderer had escaped.

"And your speech," said the other member. "I am afraid —"

"No," said Minch. "That can't stop me. Nobody could be sorrier than I am. But private grief is one thing, public duty another."

"But, look here," said the other member. "I mean — you're a peer."

"I'm a what!" said Minch.

"You're a peer now," said the other again.

"My God!" Minch answered.

Well, that was the end of that. The gang had done it. They attacked as any man of sense would always attack, at the weakest point, where nobody was expecting it. And nobody did think of poor old Lord Inchingthwaite. He was quite obscure. But the moment he died, Peter Minch became a peer, and could make no more speeches of any sort in the House of Commons.

And he couldn't even make his speech in the House of Lords, until he had taken his seat, and all that took time. He did make the speech at a meeting that week in what had been his constituency, but Austria took no notice of that.

"So war was averted," said the young journalist.

"Well, yes," said the old journalist. "Not that it made any difference in the end."

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THE ADVENTURES OF TIMOTHY TRANT

WOMAN OF ICE

by Q. PATRICK

LIEUTENANT TRANT FIRST NOTICED her in the stern of the little steam ferry as it fussed down the Grand Canal. She was standing straight and still at the rail, watching the ancient Venetian palaces glide by.

Her beauty, he thought suddenly, was like Venice — unique and beyond time.

There was too a disturbing sensation that he had seen that wonderful brooding profile before. This, of course, was absurd, because Lieutenant Trant's exact memory was a byword at the New York Homicide Bureau. If he had seen such a face, even for five seconds, it would have left an indelible mark.

And yet, there it was, that tantalizing half-remembrance.

At first glance he had thought her American. Now he wasn't completely sure. Another quality was present which belonged more here in Europe. A quality of disenchantment. Those gray-green eyes under the gleaming black hair seemed to have looked into the very depths of darkness. No tragedy, he felt, could move her now. Something in her was frozen.

As always, when he was intrigued, his thoughts crystalized into a phrase.

Woman of Ice. . . .

She left the boat, as did he, at the wharf below the fantastic cupolas of San Marco. He outdistanced her on his way to his hotel, past the Winged Lion of Venice where the pigeons swirled in a cloud of pink-flecked gray.

Suddenly he heard behind him:

"Why, Tim Trant of all people — here in Venice!"

He turned to see two men both with straw-colored hair and welcoming smiles. The younger man's face was an impish parody of the older's handsome distinction. Trant recognized Gordon and Mike Hunt immediately. He had been at Princeton with both the brothers and Mike, the younger, had been his classmate.

"Gordon's living here in splendor in a genuine Venetian palazzo. I'm being the impecunious artist brother." Mike pumped Trant's hand. "You've got to come to dinner tonight. We insist."

Trant, his brief vacation over, was leaving early next morning. As he hesitated, he saw the Woman of Ice coming toward them. Mike, obviously, had seen her too and waved.

"Why, there's Adela."

She joined them, looking gravely at Gordon. "Oh, Mr. Hunt, I'm afraid I couldn't match that brocade for your wife anywhere."

Gordon's quick smile was vivid.

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"Never mind, Adela. Incidentally, Miss Wentworth — Timothy Trant. He's dining with us tonight." The smile moved to Trant. "You will come?"

Trant's gaze still rested on Adela Wentworth. "*Molto piacere* . . ."

The gondola slid from the moon-washed Grand Canal into the mysterious darkness of a sidewater where it tethered to a black and white pole. The palazzo was enormous. The Hunts, who came from one of New Orleans's oldest and most impoverished families, must have hit real money. Probably Mrs. Hunt, reflected Trant. Gordon was the solid type to make a financially sound marriage.

It was Mrs. Hunt. Trant realized that the moment he saw her in the great picture-hung *salone*. Older and less well-preserved than Gordon, Katharine Hunt, with her emeralds and her gaunt chic, reeked of gilt-edged securities. As only the very wealthy dare to do, she ruled the conversation through cocktails and dinner, moaning about imaginary ill-health and imaginary poverty.

"There's a dealer coming from Rome next week and I'm going to sell him some pictures. I had them valued when I bought this place and all the Venetian canvases are frightfully good, thank heavens. Otherwise, I can't imagine how I'd make both ends meet."

Trant, however, paid her but slight attention. All his interest had centered on Adela Wentworth from the moment she entered the *salone* in a simple black evening gown. Although it was obvious that she was merely Mrs. Hunt's paid nurse-companion, she was the one who really belonged in all this vast magnificence. Why, why, was she so familiar?

Was it a Bronzino? One of those haunting Medici portraits in Florence?

No, it was something less remote, more human, and something — he was sure of that now — something dimly connected with danger.

She hardly spoke, but her presence was immensely felt. It built a tension which Trant could not quite interpret, although once, when her eyes met Gordon's across the table, her whole face seemed to change as if kindled to a sudden warmth.

After dinner, Katharine Hunt expressed herself as "utterly exhausted," but condescended to postpone going to bed for a few social moments with Trant. Mike poured them both a *strega* and she gulped half of hers, screwing up her mouth:

"These dreadful Italian liqueurs. Now when I had a villa at Antibes. . ."

Adela Wentworth had strolled out alone onto the balcony. As soon as he could escape, Trant followed. Lamplit gondolas were drifting by. Far off a sweet high tenor was singing *Santa Chiara*. The Grand Canal palely reflected the spectral palaces.

Trant said: "I've met you before, haven't I?"

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"I don't think so." Her voice was indifferent. "No."

Later, his *strega* rescued from beside Mrs. Hunt, Trant was taken by Gordon on a proud but ill-informed inspection of their art treasures. Having legitimately praised the exquisite Lottos and Canalettos and politely refrained from mentioning that the Longhis were good modern copies, he asked:

"Where does Miss Wentworth come from?"

"Haven't any idea. Katharine and I found her in Paris. Katharine is always under doctor's orders, taking injections and heaven knows what. Miss Wentworth needed a job and she's a trained nurse."

Trant, who disliked the excessive sweetness of the *strega*, snatched the opportunity to secrete his half-full glass behind a marble satyr. "I've got the feeling I know something about Miss Wentworth — something I've forgotten."

Gordon's handsome face darkened with suppressed irritation. "Don't you ever stop investigating — even on vacation?"

Katharine Hunt's imperious voice trailed towards them:

"Gordon, darling, help me up those ghastly stairs to bed."

Husband and wife left and soon Gordon returned. "Adela, she's ready for her injection."

"All right." Adela Wentworth rose obediently. "And I'm rather tired too. I think I'll say good night."

She gave Trant her hand without smiling. He had never seen her smile. Somehow he couldn't quite visualize it. Quietly she disappeared, taking her mystery and the uncanny sense of impending disaster with her.

The evening without her had lost its relish for Trant, but he couldn't leave because both Gordon and Mike were anxious to reminisce about Princeton days. Gossip flowed on.

"What a change in roles," mused Gordon. "Trant — a policeman; Mike — a painter. Ten years ago Trant was going to be the great art expert and Mike was all set to be a top criminal lawyer."

"You're the only consistent one." Mike's puckish face crinkled in a grin. "Remember Gordon's ambition, Trant? To be a man of property."

Trant opened his mouth to speak, but his quick ears caught the sound of hurrying feet. Suddenly there was a scream. The footsteps clattered nearer. A terrified maid tumbled into the *salone*, calling shrilly:

"*La signora* Hunt. Quick, quick. *La signora* is dead!"

Trant ran with the two brothers up the great marble staircase. Mrs. Hunt was lying in a scarlet-canopied four-poster. An almost empty water glass stood by her side.

And she was dead. Trant, bending over her, was sure of that in a moment. In that same moment the policeman in him instinctively took control.

"Mike, get her doctor."

As Mike hurried off, he turned to the bleak-faced Gordon.

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"Was her condition really serious?"

"I — I didn't think so. Slight anemia, nerves. The doctor said he . . ."

"What injection had he prescribed?"

"Some tonic — something with iron, strychnine, I think."

"Strychnine!"

The word brought memory flooding back. With a tingle, half of excitement, half of horror, Trant realized the secret of Adela Wentworth.

"Listen, Gordon, this is terribly important. Miss Wentworth's in love with you, isn't she?"

"Don't you dare involve Adela in this." Gordon clenched his fists.

"So she is." Trant whistled. "It's the same pattern. Gordon, do you know who Adela Wentworth is?"

"Who she is?"

"She's dyed that red hair and she's older now. I only saw one photograph of her anyway. That's why I couldn't place her. Gordon, she's Laura Carewe, the Strychnine Murderess."

"Laura Carewe?" The reply denied all recognition.

"Ten years ago — in Natchez. She was tried for murder and acquitted. Remember?"

"I never heard of any. . ."

"She was a nurse. Accused of murdering a woman patient with strychnine, so she could get herself the rich husband."

Gordon looked as if he were going to crumple. Trant gripped his arm. "Where's her room?"

"Down the passage to the left. Third door."

Trant hurried out into the great corridor. As he reached the head of the staircase he stopped dead.

Running down it, like a fleeing shape in a nightmare, was the dark figure of Laura Carewe, the Woman of Ice.

She reached the hallway, crossed and plunged out through the door. In a few seconds Trant too was out in the world of moonlight and shadow. Venice, with its myriad canals, bridges, and crooked, narrow alleys, was confusing as a maze, but he glimpsed movement and ran in pursuit.

He caught up with her soon in a little deserted square. Above, topping an ornate church façade, a giant stone angel brandished a huge stone trumpet. There was a humped bridge above glittering water. He reached her at the bridge, gripping her by the arms. She didn't struggle. She stayed there, still and cold to the touch.

"Laura Carewe," he said.

"So — so Gordon told you."

"Then Gordon knows who you are?"

"Of course he does." She started to tremble. "He was so kind to me. He gave me a home. He never let anyone else know."

"Why did you run away?"

"Why?" The word seemed wrenched out of her heart. "I heard the maid, the uproar. Do you think I'm made of rock? The same dreadful pattern. I can stand anything but that."

"You did give her the injection?"

"It was the right one — I swear it was!"

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"That's what you swore in Natchez."

"It was true then too. That woman in Natchez hated me. She was jealous, neurotic. She killed herself and made it look like me for spite. She . . . oh, what's the use." She broke off. Then with a terrible, quiet bitterness she added: "Why don't you let me go? Why don't you let me kill myself?"

"When you say you're innocent?"

"Would you believe me? Would Gordon . . .?" She started to cry very softly. It was as if the angel above them had shed stone tears. "I knew there could never be anything between us. His wife was dreadful to him, nagging, demanding, but he was the most loyal husband in the world. But — just to be near him, not to be lonely any more . . ."

She stopped crying and drew herself up. Once again she was the magnificent Woman of Ice.

"I suppose you want me to go back and face the police?"

"I'm afraid you must, Miss Carewe."

They returned to the palazzo. The *carabinieri* had not yet arrived. Upstairs in Mrs. Hunt's room, Gordon and Mike were tensely watching the doctor who bent over the bed.

Gordon's eyes leaped to Laura Carewe's, but she did not seem to see him. She stood by Trant in pale, passive resignation. Like a sacrificial victim, he thought.

The doctor straightened.

"She died of an overdose of strychnine." His English was carefully correct. "There seems to be no doubt about that. The convulsions, the *risus sardonicus*."

"Then it was an accident." The words came explosively from Gordon. "Somehow or other . . ."

"Don't bother, Gordon." Laura Carewe held her head very high. She turned to the doctor. "I admit it. I deliberately injected too much. I killed her."

"No!" Gordon sprang to her side and gripped her arms. "That isn't true." His tormented gaze darted from face to face. "Don't believe her. She's only trying to protect me. And heaven knows, I don't deserve it."

He swung to Trant. "I lied to you. You're a witness. I said I didn't know she was Laura Carewe. It was a lie. That's why I hired her. My wife's left me all her money. I was planning to kill her and put the blame on Miss Carewe. I did kill Katharine, but now I can't go through with it." The travesty of a smile twisted his lips. "I guess I'm less of a heel than I thought I was."

Mike was staring in shocked bewilderment at his brother. "Gordon!"

"It's true, Mike. I'm sorry. I . . ."

"One moment." Trant was very alert now. "This is interesting, Gordon, but there's just one little thing. *How* did you kill your wife?"

"How?" Gordon jerked his head toward the empty water glass by the bed. "She asked for a drink of water. I put the strychnine in it. Oh, you won't find any traces. When you and Mike left me alone, I washed out the glass."

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"I see." Trant smiled politely at the doctor. "Strychnine, as I remember, Doctor, has a very bitter taste. It would be quite impossible, wouldn't it, to administer a lethal dose in a glass of water without the victim realizing it?"

"Quite impossible," agreed the doctor.

Trant shifted his attention to Gordon and Laura Carewe. "Thanks, anyway. Between you, you've told me all I wanted to know. Perhaps we could move downstairs for a moment."

"Downstairs? Why?"

"Oh, nothing." Trant shrugged. "Just a little formality."

In the *salone* Trant stood under a cluster of Longhis by the chair where Katharine Hunt had sat. Gordon, Laura Carewe, Mike, and the doctor watched him uneasily. From the table by the chair he picked up a glass half-full of yellowish liqueur.

"I agree with Gordon," he said quietly, "that Miss Carewe gave her patient only the regular innocent injection. I also agree with him that the lethal dose was administered earlier by mouth. But not in water. That bitter taste had to be masked. And how more effectively than by the outrageous sweetness of *strega*?"

He twirled the glass. "Just before she went to bed Mrs. Hunt drank half a glass of *strega*. That's what killed her. She even complained about its taste. I was sitting with her at the time." He paused. "Of course, we won't find any traces of strychnine here because the murderer has had plenty of time to wash it out and substitute undiluted *strega*. But . . ."

He moved closer to the others. "I agree with a third point also in Gordon's noble attempt to shield Miss Carewe. The murderer did know about her past and planned to use her as a scapegoat. Even I was cleverly used — as a policeman-witness who could be invaluable in unearthing the old murder charge."

He turned to Mike. "Remember our Princeton reminiscences tonight? Ten years ago you were planning to be a criminal lawyer. You used to follow murders like the comic strips. The famous Laura Carewe case took place in Natchez, right in your own backyard. Dyed hair or no, you'd certainly have recognized her the moment you arrived here and saw her."

Mike Hunt stammered: "Trant, you're not accusing me?"

"You gave the *strega* to Mrs. Hunt."

"But —" Mike smiled weakly. "It's absurd. It's . . ."

"You mean there's no proof?" Trant looked at his old classmate somewhat sadly. Putting down the glass, Trant moved to the marble satyr behind which he had lodged his own glass during his inspection of the pictures with Gordon. He held it up. "After my talk with Mrs. Hunt, I joined Miss Carewe on the balcony without my liqueur. When I came back for it to Mrs. Hunt, I foolishly took her glass instead of mine. I didn't drink any more of it. Here it is."

He dipped his finger in the liquid

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and put it to his tongue. "You can even trace the taste behind the sweetness. You'll find the strychnine, all right. That's the proof."

His arm stretched toward the doctor, handing him the glass. The instant before the doctor's fingers closed round it, Mike Hunt sprang forward and, jerking the glass loose, knocked it spinning. As it reached the floor, he viciously stamped on it and crushed the fragments into the thick carpet.

"Mike!" Gordon's voice was hoarse.

But his brother was rushing towards the balcony. Trant and the doctor were just too late to catch him as he dived into the canal.

They saw his plunging body, saw his head crash against a gondola post before he reached the water.

He was dead when they pulled him out of the canal.

Gordon Hunt and Laura Carewe sat palely side by side.

". . . the strychnine injections," Trant was saying, ". . . the potential nurse-murderess in the house . . . the sudden visit of a policeman friend who would know about her past . . . Mike had the perfect set-up. It must have been a great temptation."

"I see all that," said Gordon. "But there's absolutely no motive."

Trant had moved toward the opposite wall and was gazing at the cluster of Longhis.

"Your wife was developing delusions of poverty. She was going to sell some of these pictures next week to a dealer. Should be very valuable."

"I don't know anything about art. Neither did Katharine, but an expert told us . . ."

"Exactly — that all the Venetian canvases were priceless. Well, I guess the Lottos and the Canalettos are. But these Longhis, which are definitely Venetian, are nothing but competent copies. Recent too."

He turned. "Mike never had a red cent, did he? As an artist . . ."

Gordon jumped up. "You mean Mike had been copying them and selling the originals?"

"Yes. When the dealer arrived, it would all have come out. You might have overlooked it, Gordon, but not your wife."

There was a moment of silence.

"And there'd never have been any proof if you hadn't mistaken Katharine's glass for yours." Laura Carewe's voice was husky. "Isn't that rather a — a coincidence?"

"Not exactly a coincidence." A faint flush spread over Trant's face. "You see, I hadn't really switched glasses with Mrs. Hunt. Because there was no proof, I had to improvise some. That was where I faked."

Gordon gasped. "So there wasn't any strychnine in that glass?"

"Of course not. Only a guilty conscience would have thought there might be." He smiled ruefully. "You had done your amateur best to save Miss Carewe. I thought you needed a little professional assistance."

Laura Carewe was looking at him. She was no longer the Woman of Ice. . . .

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THE NAME ON THE WINDOW

by EDMUND CRISPIN

BOXING DAY — THE FIRST WEEKday after Christmas; snow and ice; road surfaces like glass under a cold fog . . . In the North Oxford home of Gervase Fen, the University Professor of English Language and Literature, the front-door bell rang at exactly three minutes past 7 in the evening.

The current festive season had taken toll of Fen's vitality and patience; it had culminated, that afternoon, in an exceptionally tiring children's party, amid whose ruins he was now recouping his energies with whiskey; and on hearing the bell he jumped inevitably to the conclusion that one of the infants he had bundled out of the door half an hour before had left behind some such prized inessential as a false nose or a bachelor's button and was returning to claim it. As it turned out, however, and despite his premonitory groans, this assumption proved to be incorrect: his doorstep was occupied not by a dyspeptic, overheated child with an unintelligible query but by a neatly-dressed graying man with a red-tipped nose and woebegone eyes.

"I can't get back," said this apparition. "I really can't get back to London tonight. The roads are impassable and such trains as there are are running hours late. Could you possibly let me have a bed?"

The tones were familiar; and by peering more attentively at the face Fen discovered that that was familiar too. "My dear Humbleby," he said cordially, "do come in. Of course you can have a bed. What are you doing in this part of the world, anyway?"

"Ghost-hunting." Detective-Inspector Humbleby, of New Scotland Yard, divested himself of his coat and hat and hung them on a hook inside the door. "Seasonable but not convenient." He stamped his feet violently, thereby producing, to judge from his expression, sensations of pain rather than warmth; and stared about him. "*Children*," he said with sudden gloom. "I daresay that one of the Oxford hotels —"

"The children have left," Fen explained, "and will not be coming back."

"Ah. Well, in that case —" And Humbleby followed Fen into the drawing-room, where a huge fire was burning and a slightly lopsided Christmas tree, stripped of its treasures, wore tinsel and miniature witch-balls and a superincumbent fairy with a raffish air. "My word, this is better. Is there a drink, perhaps? I could do with some advice, too."

Fen was already pouring the whiskey. "Sit down and be comfortable," he said. "As a matter of interest, do you believe in ghosts?"

"The evidence for *poltergeists*," Humbleby answered warily as he

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stretched out his hands to the blaze, "seems very convincing to me. . . . The Wesleys, you know, and Harry Price, and so forth. Other sorts of ghosts I'm not so sure about — though I must say I *hope* they exist, if only for the purpose of taking that silly grin off the faces of the newspapers." He picked up a battered tin locomotive from beside him on the sofa. "I say, Gervase, I was under the impression that your own children were all too old for —"

"Orphans," said Fen, jabbing at the siphon. "I've been entertaining orphans from a nearby Home . . . But as regards this particular ghost you were speaking of —"

"Oh, I don't believe in *that*." Humbleby shook his head decisively. "There's an obscure sort of nastiness about the place it's supposed to haunt — like a very sickly cake gone stale — and a man *was* killed there once, by a girl he was trying to persuade to certain practices she didn't relish at all; but the haunting part of it is just silly gossip for the benefit of visitors." Humbleby accepted the glass which Fen held out to him and brooded over it for a moment before drinking. ". . . damned Chief-Inspector," he muttered aggrievedly, "dragging me away from my Christmas lunch because —"

"Really, Humbleby — " Fen was severe. "You're very inconsequential this evening. Where is this place you're speaking of?"

"Rydalls."

"Rydalls?"

"Rydalls," said Humbleby. "The residence," he elucidated laboriously, "of Sir Charles Moberley, the architect. It's about fifteen miles from here, Abingdon way."

"Yes, I remember it now. Restoration."

"I daresay. Old, in any case. And there are big grounds, with an Eighteenth-Century pavilion about a quarter of a mile away from the house, in a park. That's where it happened — the murder, I mean."

"The murder of the man who tried to induce the girl —"

"No, no. I mean, yes. *That* murder took place in the pavilion, certainly. But then, so did the other one — the one the day before yesterday, that's to say."

Fen stared. "Sir Charles Moberley has been murdered?"

"No, no, no! Not *him*. Another architect, another knight — Sir Lucas Welsh. There's been quite a large house-party going on at Rydalls, with Sir Lucas Welsh and his daughter Jane among the guests, and it was on Christmas Eve, you see, that Sir Lucas decided he wanted to investigate the ghost."

"This is all clear enough to you, no doubt, but —"

"Do *listen* . . . It seems that Sir Lucas is — was — credulous about ghosts, so on Christmas Eve he arranged to keep vigil alone in the pavilion and —"

"And was murdered, and you don't know who did it."

"Oh, yes, I do. Sir Lucas didn't die

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at once, you see: he had time to write his murderer's name in the grime of the windowpane, and the gentleman concerned, a young German named Otto Mórike, is now safely under arrest. But what I can't decide is how Mórike got in and out of the pavilion."

"A locked-room mystery."

"In the wider sense, just that. The pavilion wasn't actually locked, but —"

Fen collected his glass from the mantelpiece, where he had put it on rising to answer the doorbell. "Begin," he suggested, "at the beginning."

"Very well." Settling back in the sofa, Humbleby sipped his whiskey gratefully. "Here, then, is this Christmas house-party at Rydalls. Host, Sir Charles Moberley, the eminent architect . . . Have you ever come across him?"

Fen shook his head.

"A big man, going gray: in some ways rather boisterous and silly, like a rugger-playing medical student in a stage of arrested development. Unmarried; private means — quite a lot of them, to judge from the sort of hospitality he dispenses; designed the Wandsworth power station and Beckford Abbey, among other things; athlete; a simple mind, and generous, I should judge, in that jealous sort of way which resents generosity in anyone else. Probably tricky, in some respects — he's not the kind of person *I* could ever feel completely at ease with. A celebrity, however: unquestionably that. And Sir Lucas Welsh, whom among others he invited to this house-party, was equally a celebrity, in the same line of business. Never having seen Sir Lucas alive, I can't say much about his character, but —"

"I think," said Fen, "that I may have met him once, at the time when he was designing the fourth quadrangle for my college. A small, dark person, wasn't he?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And with a tendency to be nervy and obstinate."

"The obstinacy there's evidence for, certainly. And I gather he was also a good deal of a faddist — Yogi, I mean, and the Baconian hypothesis, and a lot of other intellectual — um — detritus of the same dull, obvious kind: that's where the ghost vigil comes in. Jane, his daughter and heiress (and Sir Lucas was if anything even better off than Sir Charles), is a pretty little thing of eighteen of whom all you can really say is that she's a pretty little thing of eighteen. Then there's Mórike, the man I've arrested; thin, thirtyish, a Luftwaffe pilot during the war, and at present an architecture-student working over here under one of these exchange schemes the Universities are always getting up — which accounts for Sir Charles's knowing him and inviting him to the house-party. Last of the important guests — important from the point of view of the crime, that is — is a C.I.D. man (not Metropolitan, Sussex County) called James Wilburn. He's important because the

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evidence he provides is certainly reliable — there has to be a *point d'appui* in these affairs, and Wilburn is it, so you mustn't exhaust yourself doubting his word about anything.

"I won't," Fen promised. "I'll believe him."

"Good. At dinner on Christmas Eve, then, the conversation turns to the subject of the Rydalls' ghost — and I've ascertained that the person responsible for bringing this topic up was Otto Mórike. So far, so good: the Rydalls ghost was a bait Sir Lucas could be relied on to rise to, and rise to it he did, arranging eventually with his rather reluctant host to go down to the pavilion after dinner and keep watch there for an hour or two. The time arriving, he was accompanied to the place by Sir Charles and by Wilburn — neither of whom actually *entered* the pavilion. Wilburn strolled back to the house alone, leaving Sir Charles and Sir Lucas talking shop. And presently Sir Charles, having seen Sir Lucas go into the pavilion, retraced his steps likewise, arriving at the house just in time to hear the alarm bell ringing."

"Alarm bell?"

"People had watched for the ghost before, and there was a bell installed in the pavilion for them to ring if for any reason they wanted help. . . . This bell sounded, then, at shortly after 10 o'clock, and a whole party of people, including Sir Charles, Jane Welsh, and Wilburn, hastened to the rescue.

"Now, you must know that this pavilion is quite small. There's just one circular room to it, having two windows, both very firmly nailed up; and you get into this room by way of a longish, narrow hall projecting from the perimeter of the circle, the one and only door being at the outer end of this hall."

"Like a keyhole," Fen suggested. "If you saw it from the air it'd look like a keyhole, I mean; with the round part representing the room, and the thin part representing the entrance-hall, and the door right down at the bottom."

"That's it. It stands in a clearing among the trees of the park, on a very slight rise — inferior Palladian in style, with pilasters or whatever you call them; something like a decayed miniature classical temple. No one's bothered about it for decades, not since that earlier murder put an end to its career as a love nest for a succession of squires. What is it Eliot says? — something about lusts and dead limbs? Well, anyway, that's the impression it gives. A *house* is all right, because a house has been used for other things as well — eating and reading and births and deaths and so on. But this place has been used for one purpose and one purpose only, and that's exactly what it feels like. . . . There's no furniture in it, by the way. And until the wretched Sir Lucas unlocked its door, no one had been inside it for two or three years.

"To get back to the story, then.

"The weather was all right; you'll

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remember that on Christmas Eve none of this snow and foulness had started. And the rescue party, so to call them, seem to have regarded their expedition as more or less in the nature of a jaunt; I mean that they weren't seriously alarmed at the ringing of the bell, with the exception of Jane, who knew her father well enough to suspect that he'd never have interrupted his vigil, almost as soon as it had begun, for the sake of a rather futile practical joke; and even she seems to have allowed herself to be half convinced by the reassurances of the others. On arrival at the pavilion, they found the door shut but not locked; and when they opened it, and shone their torches inside, they saw a single set of footprints in the dust on the hall floor, leading to the circular room. Acting on instinct or training or both, Wilburn kept his crowd clear of these footprints; and so it was that they came — joined now by Otto Mórike, who according to his subsequent statement had been taking a solitary stroll in the grounds — to the scene of the crime.

"Fireplace, two windows, a crudely painted ceiling — crude in subject as well as in execution — a canvas chair, an unlit electric torch, festoons of cobwebs, and on everything except the chair and the torch, *dust*, layers of it. Sir Lucas was lying on the floor beneath one of the windows, quite close to the bell-push; and an old stiletto, later discovered to have been stolen from the house, had been stuck into him under the left shoulder-blade (no damning fingerprints on it, by the way; or on anything else in the vicinity). Sir Lucas was still alive, and just conscious. Wilburn bent over him to ask who was responsible. And a queer smile crossed Sir Lucas's face, and he was just able to whisper" — here Humbleby produced and consulted a notebook — "to whisper: '*Wrote it — on the window. Very first thing I did when I came round. Did it before I rang the bell or anything else, in case you didn't get here in time — in time for me to tell you who —*'

"His voice faded out then. But with a final effort he moved his head, glanced up at the window, nodded, and smiled again. That's how he died.

"They had all heard him, and they all looked. There was bright moonlight outside, and the letters stood out clearly.

"Otto.

"Well, it seems that then Otto started edging away, and Sir Charles made a grab at him, and they fought, and presently a wallop from Sir Charles sent Otto clean through the telltale window, and Sir Charles scrambled after him, and they went on fighting outside, trampling the glass to smithereens, until Wilburn and company joined in and put a stop to it. Incidentally, Wilburn says that Otto's going through the window looked *contrived* to him — a deliberate attempt to destroy evidence; though, of course, so many people *saw* the name written there that it

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remains perfectly good evidence in spite of having been destroyed."

"Motive?" Fen asked.

"Good enough. Janie Welsh was wanting to marry Otto — had fallen quite in love with him, in fact — and her father didn't approve; partly on the grounds that he thought the boy wanted Jane's prospective inheritance rather than Jane herself. To clinch it, moreover, there was the fact that Otto had been in the Luftwaffe and that Jane's mother had been killed in 1941 in an air raid. Jane being three years under the age of consent — and the attitude of magistrates, if appealed to, being in the circumstances at least problematical — it looked as if that was one marriage that would definitely not take place. So the killing of Sir Lucas had, from Otto's point of view, a double advantage: it made Jane rich and it removed the obstacle to the marriage."

"Jane's prospective guardian *not* being against it."

"Jane's prospective guardian being an uncle she could twist round her little finger . . . But here's the point." Humbleby leaned forward earnestly. "Here is the point: windows nailed shut; no secret doors — emphatically none; chimney too narrow to admit a baby; and in the dust on the hall floor only one set of footprints, made unquestionably by Sir Lucas himself . . . If you're thinking that Otto might have walked in and out *on top* of those prints, as that page-boy we've been hearing so much about recently did with King Wenceslaus, then you're wrong. Otto's feet are much too large, for one thing, and the prints hadn't been disturbed, for another: so that's out. But, then, how on earth did he manage it? There's no furniture in that hall whatever — nothing he could have used to crawl across, nothing he could have swung himself from. It's a long, bare box, that's all; and the distance between the door and the circular room (in which room, by the way, the dust on the floor was all messed up by the rescue party) is miles too far away for anyone to have jumped it. Nor was the weapon the sort of thing that could possibly have been fired from a bow or an air gun or a blowpipe or nonsense of that sort; nor was it sharp enough or heavy enough to have penetrated as deeply as it did if it had been *thrown*. So ghosts apart, what *is* the explanation? Can you see one?"

Fen made no immediate reply. Throughout this narrative he had remained standing, draped against the mantelpiece. Now he moved, collecting Humbleby's empty glass and his own and carrying them to the decanter; and it was only after they were refilled that he spoke.

"Supposing," he said, "that Otto had crossed the entrance hall on a tricycle —"

"A tricycle!" Humbleby was dumfounded. "A —"

"A tricycle, yes," Fen reiterated firmly. "Or supposing, again, that he had laid down a carpet, unrolling it in front of him as he entered and roll-

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ing it up again after him when he left . . ."

"But the dust!" wailed Humbleby. "Have I really not made it clear to you that apart from the footprints the dust was undisturbed? Tricycles, carpets . . ."

"A section of the floor at least," Fen pointed out, "was trampled on by the rescue party."

"Oh, that . . . Yes, but that didn't happen until *after* Wilburn had examined the floor."

"Examined it in detail?"

"Yes. At that stage they still didn't realize anything was wrong; and when Wilburn led them in they were giggling behind him while he did a sort of parody of detective work, throwing the beam of his torch over every inch of the floor in a pretended search for bloodstains."

"It doesn't," said Fen puritanically, "sound the sort of performance which would amuse me very much."

"I daresay not. Anyway, the point about it is that Wilburn's ready to swear that the dust was completely unmarked and undisturbed except for the footprints . . . I wish he weren't so ready to swear to that," Humbleby added dolefully, "because that's what's holding me up. But I can't budge him."

"You oughtn't to be trying to budge him, anyway," retorted Fen, whose mood of self-righteousness appeared to be growing on him. "It's unethical. What about blood, now?"

"Blood? There was practically none of it. You don't get any bleeding to speak of from that narrow type of wound."

"Ah. Just one more question, then; and if the answer's what I expect, I shall be able to tell you how Otto worked it."

"If by any remote chance," said Humbleby suspiciously, "it's *stilts* that you have in mind —"

"My dear Humbleby, don't be puerile."

Humbleby contained himself with an effort.

"Well?" he said.

"The name on the window." Fen spoke almost dramatically. "Was it written in *capital* letters?"

Whatever Humbleby had been expecting, it was clearly not this. "Yes," he answered. "But —"

"Wait." Fen drained his glass. "Wait while I make a telephone call."

He went. All at once restless, Humbleby got to his feet, lit a cheroot, and began pacing the room. Presently he discovered an elastic-driven airplane abandoned behind an armchair, wound it up, and launched it. It caught Fen a glancing blow on the temple as he reappeared in the doorway, and thence flew on into the hall where it struck and smashed a vase. "Oh, I say, I'm sorry," said Humbleby feebly.

Fen said nothing.

But after about half a minute, when he had simmered down a bit: "Locked rooms," he remarked sourly. "Locked rooms . . . I'll tell you what it is, Humbleby: you've been

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reading too much fiction, you've got locked rooms on the brain."

Humbleby thought it politic to be meek. "Yes," he said.

"Dr. Gideon Fell once gave a very brilliant lecture on The Locked-Room Problem, in connection with that business of the Hollow Man; but there was one category he didn't include."

"Well?"

Fen massaged his forehead resentfully. "He didn't include the locked-room mystery which *isn't* a locked-room mystery: like this one. So that the explanation of how Otto got in and out of that circular room is simple: he *didn't* get into it and he *didn't* get out of it at all."

Humbleby gaped. "But Sir Lucas can't have been knifed before he *entered* the circular room. Sir Charles said —"

"Ah, yes. Sir Charles saw him go in — or so he asserts. And —"

"Stop a bit." Humbleby was much perturbed. "I can see what you're getting at, but there are serious objections to it."

"Such as?"

"Well, for one thing, Sir Lucas *named* his murderer."

"A murderer who struck at him *from behind*. . . . Oh, I've no doubt Sir Lucas acted in good faith: Otto, you see, would be the only member of the house-party whom Sir Lucas *knew* to have a *motive*. In actual fact, Sir Charles had one too — as I've just discovered — but Sir Lucas wasn't aware of that. And in any case, he very particularly didn't want Otto to marry his daughter after his death, so that the risk of doing an ex-Luftwaffe man an injustice was a risk he was prepared to take. . . . Next objection?"

"The name on the window. If, as Sir Lucas said, his *very first* action on recovering consciousness was to denounce his attacker, then he'd surely, since he was capable of entering the pavilion after being knifed, have been capable of writing the name on the *outside* of the window, which would be nearest, and which was just as grimy as the inside. That objection's based, of course, on your assumption that he was struck before he ever entered the pavilion."

"I expect he did just that — wrote the name on the outside of the window, I mean."

"But the people who saw it were on the *inside*. Inside a bank, for instance, haven't you ever noticed how the bank's name —"

"The name Otto," Fen interposed, "is a palindrome. That's to say, it reads backwards as well as forwards. What's more, the capital letters used in it are symmetrical — not like B or P or R or S, but like A or H or M. So write it on the outside of a window and it will look exactly the same from the inside."

"My God, yes." Humbleby was sobered. "I never thought of that. And the fact that the name was on the *outside* would be fatal to Sir Charles, after his assertion that he'd seen Sir Lucas enter the pavilion un-

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harmed. So I suppose that the 'contriving' Wilburn noticed in the fight was Sir Charles's, not Otto's: he'd realize that the name *must* be on the outside — Sir Lucas having said that the writing of it was the very first thing he did — and he'd see the need to destroy the window before anyone could investigate closely . . . Wait, though: couldn't Sir Lucas have entered the pavilion as Sir Charles said, and later have emerged again, and —"

"One set of footprints," Fen pointed out, "on the hall floor. Not three."

Humbleby nodded. "I've been a fool about this. Locked rooms, as you said, on the brain. But what *was* Sir Charles's motive — the motive Sir Lucas didn't know about?"

"Belchester," said Fen. "Belchester cathedral. As you know, it was bombed during the war and a new one's going to be built. Well, I've just rung up the Dean, who's an acquaintance of mine, to ask about the choice of architect; and he says that it was a toss-up between Sir Charles's design and Sir Lucas's, and that Sir Lucas's won. The two men were notified by post; and it seems likely that Sir Charles's notification arrived on the morning of Christmas Eve. Sir Lucas's did too, in all probability; but Sir Lucas's was sent to his home, and even forwarded it can't, in the rush of Christmas postal traffic, have reached him at Rydalls before he was killed. So only Sir Charles *knew;* and since with Sir Lucas dead Sir Charles's design would have been accepted. . . ." Fen shrugged. "Was it money, I wonder? Or was it just the blow to his professional pride? Well, well. Let's have another drink before you telephone. In the hangman's shed it will all come to the same thing."

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We welcome to the pages of EQMM the first appearance of one of the famous names in the history of fictional roguery and ratiocination — Sax Rohmer . . . Mr. Rohmer has created many characters who are more than familiar to students of the genre. You would expect, therefore, that Mr. Rohmer's first story in EQMM would be a tale about one of these well-known criminologists or criminals. Perhaps it would be an adventure of Abû Tabâh, in secret Egypt; or an account of the methods of Moris Klaw, the dream-detective; or, more likely still, an exploit of the insidious Dr. Fu-Manchu. But no. We have not chosen a "typical" Sax Rohmer tale. Instead, we have brought you something "different" — about a character who will probably be entirely new to you. So, meet Narky, and his sidekicks Digger and Ned, in an off-the-trail yarn from the typewriter of the man who gave the world that fiend and fanatic, that yellow peril incarnate, the vile and villainous Fu-Manchu.

NARKY

by SAX ROHMER

NINE TIMES OUT O' TEN — "OLD Jack" confided to me — what you see in the noospapers is rot. Same as what you see on the stage. There's more young fellers been led astray by noospapers an' by plays than you'd ever think or imagine. My pal Narky was one of 'em.

Narky was in a small way o' business, but comfortable. Streatham was 'is pitch, an' 'e mostly stuck to the kitchen lay. If he touched for a leg o'mutton an' a small bitter, with a couple o' dozen decent spoons an' a cruiet-stand, 'e was satisfied. 'E never went beyond the kitchen. 'E just 'ad a good square meal, an' nipped out over the gardin wall with one or two things easy to carry. 'E'd built up a nice little business, an' kept 'is parents in affluent circs. Then 'e made a bloomer.

It was one o' these new cracksman plays what 'e went to see as done it. A bloke in Narky's line livin' in a swagger bachelor's flat, an' wearin' evenin' dress to all 'is meals! 'E used to do 'is business in a fur coat and a opera 'at, smokin' chice Turkish cigarettes costin' 'im, 'ere, up to a ha'penny a time!

Narky was always romantic, an' this 'ere tommyrot got 'im properly by the gills.

I told 'im plain it was temptin' Providence. I says:

"Narky, you've got a nice little business, you've got a nice girl what come of a good family" — 'er father was public 'angman at one time —

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"an' every prospec' of bein' able to settle down comfy in the noospaper an' tobaccer line, an' make a book. Don't be a fool!"

But it wasn't no good. First of all, 'e rigged 'isself up as a gent. High 'at, frock-coat, light-brown boots — all complete. 'E spent five shillin's on a beautiful red, knitted weskit, sich as a lord or a well-to-do publican might wear. 'E dons a green silk tie what 'e picked up in Lower Marsh, an' what 'ad probably belonged to a American millionaire or a bookmaker. A pair o' white kid gloves was another of 'is aristocratic fads. 'E got 'em cheap, owin' to one having' only three fingers complete.

When 'e'd got 'em all blowin', with a imitation diamond in 'is green tie an' a umbereller with the case on, I must say Narky looked the real thing. 'E wouldn't 'ave been out o' place in Bond Street, or at the National Sportin' Club.

When 'e come in 'ere, with 'is ginger moustache waxed an' all 'is armour up, 'e fair took our breath away! Why, the way 'e wore 'is high 'at — tilted well forward an' a bit on one side — was simply Piccadilly! There's no two ways about it, it was Piccadilly!

Digger an' Ned said they'd go in with 'im if 'e'd got a big thing on. So 'e told 'em to spot a likely dook or hearl, an' leave 'im to look after 'er ladyship's heirlooms! We 'ad drinks round, an' Digger an' Ned went out to see what they could do for 'im.

I 'ain't likely to forgit the night Digger come in with the noos about the Walworth Road pawnbroker — 'an 'is lovely daughter. As Ned said: "With a lovely woman in the case it's a cinch for Narky!"

When Digger give us full partics, I could see Narky fancied 'is luck by the way 'e kep' lookin' at 'isself in a lookin'-glass, an' shifting 'is high 'at more forward till you couldn't see 'is eyes. Anyhow, the end of it was, we all started off for the Walworth Road, me an' Digger an' Ned, with Narky walkin' on the other side of the street.

We'd arranged a little plot together. Me an' Ned — what she'd never seen — was to go in an' pop something so as to get a look at the daughter. If she come up to Digger's description as regards sportiness, we was to give the wink to Narky.

A little dispute cropped up right at the door, owin' to Ned wantin' to pawn my 'at. As I told 'im, it wasn't natural for a old bloke with whiskers an' a bald 'ead to walk into a pawnshop on a cold night an' pawn 'is 'at. Not while 'e was sober. I pointed out 'ow suspicious it would look, an' suggested Ned's overcoat. There was more trouble about that, an' at last we decided to offer my pipe.

In we went, an' there was no sign of the lovely daughter as per Digger, only an old gent. We 'ad to say something, so I showed 'im my pipe.

It took 'im nearly five minutes to tell us all the kinds of fools 'e thought we was, an' I kep' suggestin' noo kinds

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to pass the time. But still no daughter. So we came out, explainin' to the p'liceman who'd been sent for that we'd just come 'ome from Chinee, where well-coloured pipes like mine was reckoned very vallyble.

Well, I wasn't goin' to turn it up, so I suggested we went back an' offered somethin' else. Ned says: "It'll 'ave to be your 'at, Jack!" very said.

I says: "What about that fo'r penny-bit o' yours with a 'ole in it? Offer to sell it — for fourpence-ha'penny."

So in we goes again, as large as life. An' there's the daughter, laughin' with 'er father be'ind the counter.

Ned says: " 'E's tryin' to describe your face to 'er, Jack!"

Before I could think of a proper answer to 'im, we was right inside.

"You 'ere again!" shouted the pawnbroker. "Get out o' my shop, or I'll give you in charge!"

'E was well waxed, but we 'ardly noticed 'im. We was that struck with 'is daughter. No doubt about it, she was a oil paintin'. A fine girl she was — make two o' me an' Ned put together — with black eyes and lovely blue earrings hangin' down on to 'er shoulders. She 'ad a big gold chain round 'er neck an' 'er 'ands was so full o' diamond rings she couldn't bend 'er fingers. Looked a perfect duchess, she did.

"What are you starin' at?" she says, that saucy; an' showed 'er beautiful white teeth, with a gold 'un in the left top corner.

I felt quite young again, for the moment. Then:

"What's the matter with *you*, Father Christmas?" she says. And I bobbed down.

Well, I could see she was right up to Digger's account, an' was regrettin' we 'adn't got Narky outside, when who should butt in but 'is nibs 'im-self! 'E'd got tired of waitin'. 'E see 'is chance in a flash.

"Is these men annoyin' you, miss?" 'e says, surprised.

I could see from the way she looked at 'im 'e'd made a 'it. Ned was smart. 'E says: "We only come in to pawn somethin', guv'nor!"

"Git out o' my shop!" hollered the pawnbroker.

"Shall I put these 'ere fellers out, miss?" asks Narky, rising 'is high 'at like a hearl.

She just laughed an' looked at 'im the way girls do when they're struck. An' 'e got 'old of us one in each 'and an' rushed us out of the door. Ned objected to bein' 'handled by 'is ear. As 'e said to me outside: "I see Narky's move. But there wasn't no occasion not whatever for 'im to kop 'old o' me by the *ear!* I shall mention that to Narky!" 'e says.

Well, Narky got away with it wonderful. 'E started payin' attention to the pawnbroker's daughter, an' used to spend nearly all the evenin' in the shop, talkin' to 'er. 'Er father didn't take to 'im, funny enough; but 'e put up with that.

'E says to me one night in 'is bed-

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room in Bream's Mews: "I ain't altogether satisfied. I can't git 'er to come for a walk with me!" 'e says. "She's always got a excuse. Still p'r'aps it's a good job. If Loo" (that's 'is girl) "spotted me, there'd be trouble. She'd never understand it was business!"

It seemed funny, certainly. But as I told 'im, there might be another bloke what she'd jilted for 'im, an' who she didn't want to run into in case Narky got shot.

That cheered 'im up wonderful; an' 'e set to work on 'is high 'at with the blacking brush in a way as did me good to see. When 'e'd got 'em all on ('e was just goin' down to see 'er) 'e looked a fair picture. 'E 'ad a pink shirt on, which not only matched 'is red weskit, but set off 'is green tie beautiful. And 'e'd bought a nice yaller dahlia for 'is button'ole. Digger (as 'ad been in the Militia) suggested as the white glove what 'ad only three fingers would look smarter if 'e pipe-clayed 'is 'ands. But that seemed to annoy Narky, so we dropped the subject.

'E says: "Blowed if I don't tap 'er about the safe! I asked 'er to kiss me good night last night, an' though she didn't, I see 'er laughin' as she dropped the iron shutter! I'm nearly stony!" 'e says. "I shall 'ave to go nap!"

We was all knocked silly that evenin' when he walked in 'ere just before closin' time with a face like a full moon an' says: "Drink up! I'm goin' to touch on Friday night!"

It appears 'e'd got on partic'lar well — unexpected well. She'd let 'im 'old 'er 'and over the counter — not 'avin' any rings on that evenin' — an' 'e asked 'er to fly with 'im to lands across the sea.

She asked 'im what lands; but 'e couldn't think of any.

"Why," she says, "I've just been waitin' an' longin' for this!"

"Eh?" says Narky, 'ardly able to believe 'is ears. Fair paralyzed 'e said 'e was.

"When shall we go, dear?" she asks 'im, very soft.

'E drew a deep breath, seein' it was gettin' serious. It was now or never!

"Well," 'e says, "I'm rather short o' ready, to put it quite plain to you," 'e says. "To be perfectly open about it, my dear, I'm waitin' for my people to send me a couple of thou. or so!" 'e says.

"*I* know where we can get some money to go on with!" she whispers.

Narky 'ad a lump in 'is throat like a three-'apenny baked potater. 'E'd never dared to 'ope it would be sich a walk over.

"Go away now," she says, very soft, bendin' over the counter, "an' don't come 'ere again till Thur — *Friday* night, after closin' time! I'll let you in the sideway . . . an' show you the strong-room!" she says, so low 'e could 'ardly 'ear 'er.

We all listened, breathless, while Narky told us, like I'm tellin' you. Then Ned asks:

"Was it Friday or *Thursday* she

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said, Narky? You didn't seem quite sure some'ow, when you was tellin' us."

"Friday!" answers Narky, very quick, n' turnin' to the counter, 'e called for drinks all round.

We all drank good luck to Friday — joyful. Only Ned, 'e drank 'is too, but kind of moody.

Now, 'ere comes the wickedness of 'uman nature.

On *Thursday* night, about 11:30 a gen'l'man in a 'igh 'at, carryin' a nice umbereller what 'ad never smelled the rain, an' likewise a large grip, might 'ave been seen comin' out o' Bream's Mews. The gen'l'man in the 'igh 'at was none other than 'is jills, Narky.

'E walked all the way an' 'e was actually in Walworth Road when someone claps 'im on the shoulder, an' 'e spins round as if 'e'd been struck by lightnin'. It was Ned! An' *'e* was carryin' a big bag too!

"Narky," 'e says, "I've brought my tools along as well, in case you 'ave any trouble with the safe!" 'e says, smilin' affectionate.

Well, Narky was knocked silly for a minute. So they slipped into a quiet bar an' 'ad a pick-me-up.

Then Narky asks, very faint: "Has the others rumbled me?"

"No, Narky," says Ned, "they 'aven't!"

Well, what arrangement they come to, I can't tell you. I might make a guess, but I won't. Only in the end the pair of 'em crep' up to the pawnbroker's side door an' knocked gentle. There was no light to be seen in the 'ouse, but almost immediate the girl opened the door. When she sees Ned's face over Narky's shoulder, she gives a little scream, which annoyed Ned considerable.

"It's orlright, Jenny," whispers Narky. "This is my valley!"

Still she 'eld the door an' seemed as if she couldn't make up 'er mind. Ned could see she 'adn't expected 'im, an' 'e was thankin' 'is lucky stars 'e'd tumbled to Narky's little game in time.

Well, after Narky 'ad whispered to 'er for a while, (Ned couldn't catch what 'e said) she let 'em both in. Narky whispered to him that the pawnbroker was away an' there was nobody else in the 'ouse, only a deaf servant.

The girl led 'em along a dim passage, up some stairs, all in the dark, along another passage, an' down some more stairs.

"It's a larger 'ouse than I 'ad supposed, Jenny," Narky whispered.

She answered: "S-sh! 'Ere it is!"

Before you could say Jack Robinson, Ned 'ad 'is bag open an' 'is lantern shinin' on the door. An' it wasn't 'alf a door! Not 'alf it wasn't! An iron door, it was, like a bank, an' they could see it was goin' to be a tough job.

"'E's taken the keys away with 'im," whispered Jenny, "but p'r'aps your valley knows how to break open doors, Claud?"

"*Claud!*" began Ned. But Narky stood on 'is favourite corn, brisk, an'

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'e stopped — partly to oblige Narky, but principally because the pain took 'is breath away.

Well, the girl gave a kind of little sob — suggestin' to Ned, who's soft-'earted, that she was tore between love an' dooty — an' whispered: "Till tomorrer. Leave no trace — for my sake."

They 'eard 'er skirts switchin', an' she was gone.

I've heard a good many blokes tell what 'ard work's like, but I never listened to a more thrillin' narrative than what Ned told me about this 'ere strong-room door. Even when 'e was tellin' me, the perspiration poured off of 'im, an' 'e trembled at the knees most pathetic.

For about two hours they went at it every way they knew. Narky, to begin with, wore 'is high 'at an' 'is frock-coat — also, 'e smoked a cigarette, very cool. But by the end of the first hour's graft 'e'd laid aside the coat, an' likewise the knitted weskit. But 'e stuck to 'is high 'at. Only 'e 'adn't got any wind left for smokin'.

As for Ned, 'e admits as 'is language was shockin'.

They busted all their skeleton keys an' they bent a steel crowbar (best Sheffield) into a ornamental figure eight! But the door 'adn't got a scratch.

They tried to force a bottom 'inge, but Narky only broke 'is silk braces, an' Ned blame near burst a blood-vessel.

What was to be done? In about another two hours it would be daylight; an' the bloomin' door, after about eighteen rounds, looked as fresh as paint — while as for Ned an' Narky, they was blown out.

Narky 'ad a drop o' brandy with 'im, an' they finished it between 'em, an' made a fresh start.

For another clear hour they worked like lunatic stokers, till Ned felt as 'e was liable to drop dead at any minute. Then 'e chucked down 'is tools an' leaned up against the bloomin' door, quite dizzy.

'E says: "Narky, no 'uman 'and," 'e says, "made this 'ere door. It's the fair limit, it is."

Narky looked at 'im an' then at the door an' burst into tears. 'E says: "Ned, must we go away broke," 'e says, "with 5000 jimmy o' goblins starin' us in the face?"

Ned says: "If you don't 'appen to 'ave 'alf a pound o' dynamite about you, I reckon we must."

Then Narky chucked 'is high 'at on the floor an' jumped on it.

It was while 'e was a-jumpin' on it that 'e 'eard something jangle under 'is foot. Snatchin' up the lantern, 'e shone it into a corner — an' there lay a bunch o' keys!

'E says: "Ned! *Ned!*" 'e says, 'usky. "Is it too good to be true, or am I a-dreamin'? Can it be," 'e says, almost sobbin', "can it be as the old gent dropped 'is keys!"

'E took the keys an' began to try 'em on the door.

"It ain't a combination look," 'e says, in a quiverin' voice, "an' if

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the right key's 'ere, we're made!"

Well, the key was there right enough. Yes, if I never move again off this 'ere stool, the key was there! When Narky fitted in the lock, 'e 'adn't got the pluck left to turn it. 'E come over quite faint. 'E felt like sitting down an' cryin' again — is 'eart was that full.

At last 'e pulled 'isself together an' turned the key. Open come the door. In nipped poor Narky. An' (the wickedness o' the 'uman female 'eart!) found isself outside in the street, an' right in the arms of a six-foot copper as was waitin' there for 'im!

Can you believe it? Would you think such a lovely woman could be so wicked disposed?

To think o' settin' that poor bloke to slave 'is life out through the mortal weary night on a door what opened on the street, an' then get 'im pinched!

Well, Narky was a pal at the finish. As 'e felt the bracelets snap on 'is wrists, 'e 'ollered, "Run for it, Ned! I'm nobbled!"

So out rushed Ned, like a whirlwind, dodges the copper — what Narky was keepin' busy, an' flies for 'is life just as the whistle starts.

From a top winder 'e 'eard Jenny: "Got 'im, Bob?"

"I've got the ringleader, Jenny dear!" says the copper. "The other one's scooted."

Yes, guv'nor, it *is* dry work. Thank you, I don't mind a final as it's closin' time. O' course, it was a bloomin' plant. That wicked woman 'ad rumbled Narky's lay right from the start. She got it all laid out for 'im. But the unnecessary wickedness o' lettin' 'im spend the night on that bloomin' door! Whether she nipped down while they was workin' an' planted the keys, or whether they was planted all the time, we never found out. Oh, the door was a blessed goods entrance. It was faced with wood outside. The old boy 'ad been burgled through it once, so 'e 'ad a noo 'un made of iron.

It turned out as the six-foot copper was only waitin' to get made sergeant to marry Jenny. This 'ere smart, single-'anded capture just did the trick for 'im nicely.

The 'orrible wickedness o' some lovely women passes belief!

Poor Narky tried to do 'er a bit o' no good at 'is trial, but the Bench wouldn't listen to 'im.

Ned got away — yes.

No, Narky ain't out yet. Good night, guv'nor!

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Talking about off-the-trail stories, here is one you are not likely ever to forget. It is unusual even for such an unusual writer as James Thurber — and that's saying a lot. Mr. Thurber himself gave the tip-off when he subtitled "The White Rabbit Caper" an example of what "the boys who turn out the mystery programs on the air might write" as "a story for children." But don't be fooled — it's no story for children . . .

"The White Rabbit Caper" will be included in James Thurber's new book of short stories, THURBER COUNTRY, *to be published by Simon and Schuster this Spring.*

THE WHITE RABBIT CAPER

by JAMES THURBER

FRED FOX WAS POURING HIMSELF A slug of rye when the door of his office opened and in hopped old Mrs. Rabbit. She was a white rabbit with pink eyes, and she wore a shawl on her head, and gold-rimmed spectacles.

"I want you to find Daphne," she said tearfully, and she handed Fred Fox a snapshot of a white rabbit with pink eyes that looked to him like a picture of every other white rabbit with pink eyes.

"When did she hop the hutch?" asked Fred Fox.

"Yesterday," said old Mrs. Rabbit. "She is only eighteen months old, and I am afraid that some superstitious creature has killed her for one of her feet."

Fred Fox turned the snapshot over and put it in his pocket. "Has this bunny got a throb?" he asked.

"Yes," said old Mrs. Rabbit. "Franz Frog, repulsive owner of the notorious Lily Pad Night Club."

Fred Fox leaped to his feet. "Come on, Grandma," he said, "and don't step on your ears. We got to move fast."

On the way to the Lily Pad Night Club, old Mrs. Rabbit scampered so fast that Fred Fox had all he could do to keep up with her. "Daphne is my great-great-great-great-great-grand-daughter, if my memory serves," said old Mrs. Rabbit. "I have 39,000 descendants."

"This isn't going to be easy," said Fred Fox. "Maybe you should have gone to a magician with a hat."

"But she is the only one named Daphne," said old Mrs. Rabbit, "and she lived alone with me on my great carrot farm."

They came to a broad brook. "Skip it!" said Fred Fox.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head,

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young man," snapped old Mrs. Rabbit.

Just as they got to the Lily Pad, a dandelion clock struck 12 noon. Fred Fox pushed the button on the great green door, on which was painted a white water lily. The door opened an eighth of an inch, and Ben Rat peered out. "Beat it," he said, but Fred Fox shoved the door open, and old Mrs. Rabbit followed him into a cool green hallway, softly but restlessly lighted by thousands of fireflies imprisoned in the hollow crystal pendants of an enormous chandelier. At the right there was a flight of green-carpeted stairs, and at the bottom of the steps the door to the cloakroom. Straight ahead, at the end of the long hallway, was the cool green door to Franz Frog's office.

"Beat it," said Ben Rat again.

"Talk nice," said Fred Fox, "or I'll seal your house up with tin. Where's the Croaker?"

"Once a gumpaw, always a gumpaw," grumbled Ben Rat. "He's in his office."

"With Daphne?"

"Who's Daphne?" asked Ben Rat.

"My great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter," said old Mrs. Rabbit.

"Nobody's that great," snarled Ben Rat.

Fred Fox opened the cool green door and went into Franz Frog's office, followed by old Mrs. Rabbit and Ben Rat. The owner of the Lily Pad sat behind his desk, wearing a green suit, green shirt, green tie, green socks, and green shoes. He had an emerald tiepin and seven emerald rings. "Whong you wong, Fonnxx?" he rumbled in a cold, green, cavernous voice. His eyes bulged and his throat began to swell ominously.

"He's going to croak," explained Ben Rat.

"Nuts," said Fred Fox. "He'll outlive all of us."

"Glunk," croaked Franz Frog.

Ben Rat glared at Fred Fox. "You oughta go on the stage," he snarled.

"Where's Daphne?" demanded Fred Fox.

"Hoong Dangneng?" asked Franz Frog.

"Your bunny friend," said Fred Fox.

"Nawng," said Franz Frog.

Fred Fox picked up a cello in a corner and put it down. It was too light to contain a rabbit. The front-door bell rang. "I'll get it," said Fred Fox. It was Oliver (Hoot) Owl, a notorious fly-by-night. "What're you doing up at this hour, Hoot?" asked Fred Fox.

"I'm trying to blind myself, so I'll confess," said Hoot Owl testily.

"Confess to what?" snapped Fred Fox.

"What can't you solve?" asked Hoot Owl.

"The disappearance of Daphne," said Fred Fox.

"Who's Daphne?" asked Hoot Owl.

Franz Frog hopped out of his office into the hall. Ben Rat and old Mrs. Rabbit followed him.

Down the steps from the second

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floor came Sherman Stork, carrying a white muffler or something and grinning foolishly.

"Well, bless my soul!" said Fred Fox. "If it isn't old mid-husband himself! What did you do with Daphne?"

"Who's Daphne?" asked Sherman Stork.

"Fox thinks somebody killed Daphne Rabbit," said Ben Rat.

"Fonnxx cung brong," rumbled Franz Frog.

"I *could* be wrong," said Fred Fox, "but I'm not." He pulled open the cloakroom door at the bottom of the steps, and the dead body of a female white rabbit toppled furrily onto the cool green carpet. Her head had been bashed in by a heavy blunt instrument.

"Daphne!" screamed old Mrs. Rabbit, bursting into tears.

"I can't see a thing," said Hoot Owl.

"It's a dead white rabbit," said Ben Rat. "Anybody can see that. You're dumb."

"I'm wise!" said Hoot Owl indignantly. "I know everything."

"Jeeng Crine," moaned Franz Frog. He stared up at the chandelier, his eyes bulging and his mammoth mouth gaping open. All the fireflies were frightened and went out.

The cool green hallway became pitch dark. There was a shriek in the black, and a feathery "plump." The fireflies lighted up to see what had happened. Hoot Owl lay dead on the cool green carpet, his head bashed in by a heavy blunt instrument. Ben Rat, Franz Frog, Sherman Stork, old Mrs. Rabbit, and Fred Fox stared at Hoot Owl. Over the cool green carpet crawled a warm red stain, whose source was the body of Hoot Owl. He lay like a feather duster.

"Murder!" squealed old Mrs. Rabbit.

"Nobody leaves this hallway!" snapped Fred Fox. "There's a killer loose in this club!"

"I am not used to death," said Sherman Stork.

"Roong!" groaned Franz Frog.

"He says he's ruined," said Ben Rat, but Fred Fox wasn't listening. He was looking for a heavy blunt instrument. There wasn't any.

"Search them!" cried old Mrs. Rabbit. "Somebody has a sap, or a sock full of sand, or something!"

"Yeh," said Fred Fox. "Ben Rat is a sap — maybe someone swung him by his tail."

"You oughta go on the stage," snarled Ben Rat.

Fred Fox searched the suspects, but he found no concealed weapon. "You could have strangled them with that muffler," Fred Fox told Sherman Stork.

"But they were not strangled," said Sherman Stork.

Fred Fox turned to Ben Rat. "You could have bitten them to death with your ugly teeth," he said.

"But they weren't bitten to death," said Ben Rat.

Fred Fox stared at Franz Frog. "You could have scared them to

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death with your ugly face," he said.

"Bung wung screng ta deng," said Franz Frog.

"You're right," admitted Fred Fox. "They weren't. Where's old Mrs. Rabbit?" he asked suddenly.

"I'm hiding in here," called old Mrs. Rabbit from the cloakroom. "I'm frightened."

Fred Fox got her out of the cool green sanctuary and went in himself. It was dark. He groped around on the cool green carpet. He didn't know what he was looking for, but he found it, a small object lying in a far corner. He put it in his pocket and came out of the cloakroom.

"What'd you find, shamus?" asked Ben Rat apprehensively.

"Exhibit A," said Fred Fox casually.

"Sahng plang keeng," moaned Franz Frog.

"He says somebody's playing for keeps," said Ben Rat.

"He can say that again," said Fred Fox as the front door was flung open and Inspector Mastiff trotted in, followed by Sergeant Dachshund.

"Well, well, look who's muzzling in," said Fred Fox.

"What have we got here?" barked Inspector Mastiff.

"I hate a private nose," said Shergeant Dachshund.

Fred Fox grinned at him. "What happened to your legs from the knees down, sport?" he asked.

"Drop dead," snarled Sergeant Dachshund.

"Quiet, both of you!" snapped Inspector Mastiff. "I know Ollie Owl, but who's the $20 Easter present from Schrafft's?" He turned on Fred Fox. "If this bunny's head comes off and she's filled with candy, I'll have your badge, Fox," he growled.

"She's real, Inspector," said Fred Fox. "Real dead, too. How did you pick up the scent?"

Inspector Mastiff howled. "The Sergeant thought he smelled a rat at the Lily Club," he said. "Wrong again, as usual. Who's this dead rabbit?"

"She's my great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter," sobbed old Mrs. Rabbit.

Fred Fox lighted a cigarette. "Oh, no, she isn't, sweetheart," he said coolly. "You are *her* great-great-great-great-great-granddaughter." Pink lightning flared in the live white rabbit's eyes. "You killed the old lady, so you could take over her carrot farm," continued Fred Fox, "and then you killed Hoot Owl."

"I'll kill you, too, shamus!" shrieked Daphne Rabbit.

"Put the cuffs on her, Sergeant," barked Inspector Mastiff. Sergeant Dachshund put a pair of handcuffs on the front legs of the dead rabbit. "Not *her*, you dumb kraut!" yelped Inspector Mastiff. It was too late. Daphne Rabbit had jumped through a windowpane and run away, with the Sergeant in hot pursuit. . . .

"All white rabbits look alike to me," growled Inspector Mastiff. "How could you tell them apart—from their ears?"

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"No," said Fred Fox. "From their years. The white rabbit that called on me darn near beat me to the Lily Pad, and no old woman can do that."

"Don't brag," said Inspector Mastiff. "Spryness isn't enough. What else?"

"She understood expressions an old rabbit doesn't know," said Fred Fox, "like 'hop the hutch' and 'throb' and 'skip it' and 'sap.' "

"You can't hang a rabbit for her vocabulary," said Inspector Mastiff. "Come again."

Fred Fox pulled the snapshot out of his pocket. "The white rabbit who called on me told me Daphne was eighteen months old," he said, "but read what it says on the back of this picture."

Inspector Mastiff took the snapshot, turned it over, and read, " 'Daphne on her second birthday.' "

"Yes," said Fred Fox. "Daphne knocked six months off her age. You see, Inspector, she couldn't read the writing on the snapshot, because those weren't her spectacles she was wearing."

"Now wait a minute," growled Inspector Mastiff. "Why did she kill Hoot Owl?"

"Elementary, my dear Mastiff," said Fred Fox. "Hoot Owl lived in an oak tree, and she was afraid he saw her burrowing into the club last night, dragging Grandma. She heard Hoot Owl say, 'I'm wise. I know everything,' and so she killed him."

"What with?" demanded the Inspector.

"Her right hind foot," said Fred Fox. "I was looking for a concealed weapon, and all the time she was carrying her heavy blunt instrument openly."

"Well, what do you know!" exclaimed Inspector Mastiff. "Do you think Hoot Owl really saw her?"

"Could be," said Fred Fox. "I happen to think he was bragging about his wisdom in general and not about a particular piece of information, but your guess is as good as mine."

"What did you pick up in the cloakroom?" squeaked Ben Rat.

"The final strand in the rope that will hang Daphne," said Fred Fox. "I knew she didn't go in there to hide. She went in there to look for something she lost last night. If she'd been frightened, she would have hidden when the flies went out, but she went in there after the flies lighted up again."

"That adds up," said Inspector Mastiff grudgingly. "What was it she was looking for?"

"Well," said Fred Fox, "she heard something drop in the dark when she dragged Grandma in there last night and she thought it was a button, or a buckle, or a bead, or a bangle, or a brooch that would incriminate her. That's why she rang me in on the case. She couldn't come here alone."

"Well, what was it, Fox?" snapped Inspector Mastiff.

"A carrot," said Fred Fox, and he took it out of his pocket, "probably fell out of old Mrs. Rabbit's reticule, if you like irony."

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"One more question," said Inspector Mastiff. "Why plant the body in the Lily Pad?"

"Easy," said Fred Fox. "She wanted to throw suspicion on the Croaker, a well-known lady-killer."

"Nawng," rumbled Franz Frog.

"Well, there it is, Inspector," said Fred Fox, "all wrapped up for you and tied with ribbons."

Ben Rat disappeared into a wall. Franz Frog hopped back to his office.

"Mercy!" cried Sherman Stork. "I'm late for an appointment!" He flew to the front door and opened it.

There stood Daphne Rabbit, holding the unconscious form of Sergeant Dachshund. "I give up," she said. "I surrender."

"Is he dead?" asked Inspector Mastiff hopefully.

"No," said Daphne Rabbit. "He fainted."

"I never have any luck," growled Inspector Mastiff.

Fred Fox leaned over and pointed to Daphne's right hind foot. "Owl feathers," he said. "She's all yours, Inspector."

"Thanks, Fox," said Inspector Mastiff. "I'll throw something your way someday."

"Make it a nice, plump Plymouth Rock pullet," said Fred Fox, and he sauntered out of the Lily Pad. . .

Back in his office, Fred Fox dictated his report on the White Rabbit Caper to his secretary, Lura Fox. "Period. End of report," he said finally, toying with the emerald stickpin he had taken from Franz Frog's green necktie when the fireflies went out.

"Is she pretty?" asked Lura Fox.

"Daphne? Quite a dish," said Fred Fox, "but I like my rabbits stewed, and I'm afraid little Daphne is going to fry."

"But she's so young, Fred!" cried Lura Fox. "Only eighteen months!"

"You weren't listening," said Fred Fox.

"How did you know she wasn't interested in Franz Frog?" asked Lura Fox.

"Simple," said Fred Fox. "Wrong species."

"What became of the candy, Fred?" asked Lura Fox.

Fred Fox stared at her. "What candy?" he asked blankly.

Lura Fox suddenly burst into tears. "She was so soft, and warm, and cuddly, Fred," she wailed.

Fred Fox filled a glass with rye, drank it slowly, set down the glass, and sighed grimly. "Sour racket," he said.

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EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

BLACK WIDOW *by Q. PATRICK* (SIMON & SCHUSTER, $2.50)	"Slick but not at all shallow . . . and the plotting is elegant. Expert." (AdV)	"It's at once a first-rate formal detective story . . . and a compelling straight suspense novel." (AB)
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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key on the right gives sources.

"Superb suspense, deft unravelling, and skillful character dismantling." (DD)	". . . skillfully manipulated theatricalities . . . Put this down as sleek and satisfactory." (JS)	
". . . genuinely exciting, with that feeling of reality that is Canning's special talent. B plus." (LGO)	". . . outstanding . . . Canning . . . is unsurpassed today in the intrigue sector of the mystery field." (DBH)	
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". . . unusually good background; surprise ending isn't bad either. B minus." (LGO)	"It all wears its silliness with an air and gets by very smoothly." (JS)	
"Quality well-maintained . . . Nice sheaf." (SC)	"In spite of scattered strengths, the anthology is a weak one in a not very strong year." (JS)	

KEY TO REVIEW SOURCES

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville Press*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*

DD: *Drexel Drake in the Chicago Tribune*

DBH: Dorothy B. Hughes in the Los Angeles Daily News

LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*

FP: *Fay Profilet in the Saint Louis Post Dispatch*

JS: *James Sandoe in the New York Herald Tribune*

AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

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THE CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

by AUSTIN RIPLEY

"I KNEW the body had been in water for some days," said Harbor Detective Ronson, as he and Professor Fordney proceeded to the morgue where the formal identification of the remains was to take place.

"We found him where you said we probably would," continued Ronson. "A nasty sight he was, too, lying face down on the muddy river bank, the back of his head battered in and covered with blood, and his clothes sodden and almost colorless as only long immersion could make them. And his face! Well, you'll see that for yourself. He had been in the water for at least four days. I'm confident it's Bitterworth from the description, though I couldn't decipher any of the papers on the body — they were so soaked and illegible."

Professor Fordney turned a quizzical glance toward the detective as the taxi sped to the morgue, but he said nothing. Arriving there, they found in the outer office a tearful Mrs. Bitterworth, accompanied by her brother. After a word or two with them, the deputy coroner, the Professor, and the detective went to the air-cooled chamber below where an attendant pulled out a slab on which lay the green and bloated body of a man.

Mrs. Bitterworth steeled herself to take a look; then she cried, "That's not Charles!" and fainted. Her brother definitely confirmed his sister's statement.

The body was not that of Charles Bitterworth.

"While a mistake in identification is understandable in such a case, I'm quite surprised at your oversight, Ronson," Fordney said later reproachfully. "You should have known better!"

What did Professor Fordney mean? Can you spot Detective Ronson's oversight? You will find the solution at the bottom of the page, printed upside-down.

Detective Ronson told Fordney that the body had been in the water *at least four days*. Had that been true, there could not possibly have been any blood on the corpse's head — the water would have washed it away during the four days of immersion.

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The dramatis personæ *of "The Unpleasantness at the Stooges Club" may be divided, unlike ancient Gaul, into two parts. The first group of characters is offstage throughout the "unpleasantness," the other is on stage. The offstage contingent is surely the more distinguished of the two, since its members include some of the most eminent sleuths of all time — to wit, Messieurs Dupin and Poirot; Philo Vance, Nigel Strangeways, and Barnabas Hildreth; Counsellors John J. Malone and Perry Mason; Doctors Thorndyke, Fell, and Priestley; Inspectors French, Appleby, Hanaud, and Maigret; Father Brown, Lord Peter Wimsey, Miss Marple, Sir Henry Merrivale, and Slim Callaghan; "the aged Baker Street genius, called back from beekeeping retirement," and such other luminaries as Uncle Abner and Nero Wolfe.*

But this tale of "unpleasantness" does not concern itself with the great detectives of fiction — at least, not directly. For once an author — an obviously kind gentleman, his heart filled with compassion — has dared to place the lesser lights upon the main stage, and give these underdogs their day. Surely you have wished, at one time or another, to see the unhonored and unsung "Dr. Watsons" have their chance to investigate a crime, ape their infallible masters, and solve an impenetrable mystery? Well, the time has come — as the walrus once said. Here is the tale of an absolutely impossible murder which is thrown smack into the laps of Dr. Watson, Captain Hastings, Squire Randolph, Nikki Porter, Ricardo, and other chroniclers and colleagues of the famous crime-busters while the masters themselves are — of all things! — Morocco-bound for the First International Congress of Fictional Sleuths.

Happy reading!

THE UNPLEASANTNESS AT THE STOOGES CLUB

by W. HEIDENFELD

HMS *Investigate*, Morocco-bound, with the most precious and, probably, the most curious cargo ever carried by any ship, was a mere speck on the horizon. The crowd of idle onlookers and passengers' friends had dwindled to a few habitual dock watchers, when the tall graying gen-

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tleman, who had watched every step of the ship's departure from a custom's shed, left the safety of his hiding place and joined the few stragglers on the quay. He gave one last glance at the disappearing little dot far out, then he turned and walked briskly off the quay. His step was almost youthful, belying his years; and it was eloquent. It said, "Good Riddance."

The *Investigate* had been chartered for a purpose not only special but unique. She did not carry jewels to fill the vaults of a maharajah, nor uranium nor gold nor precious goods. The *Investigate's* cargo was more valuable than any of these. It was human — marked not *Fragile!* or *With Care!* but *Top Secret!*

Unknown to the man in the street, unknown even to the man in Fleet Street, the *Investigate* conveyed to the First International Congress of Fictional Sleuths the persons of Messieurs Dupin and Poirot; Messrs. Philo Vance, Nigel Strangeways, and Ellery Queen; Counsellors John J. Malone and Perry Mason; Doctors Thorndyke, Fell, and Priestley; the very English Inspectors French and Appleby and the very French Inspectors Hanaud and Maigret; Father Brown, Lord Peter Wimsey, Nero Wolfe, and many others of lesser fame.

India had been chosen as the venue of the first gathering for two reasons. One was the mysterious and almost incredible end of Professor Poggioli, which had never been cleared up. After all, as the ever prim, proper, and practical Miss Marple, one of the few lady-members of the team, had remarked: "How could Fictional Sleuths expect the public to bring their mysteries to them if they conspicuously failed to keep their own house in order?" "You couldn't have a detective chap hanged for a murder he might not have committed — what?" (This was Lord Peter speaking after the gentle lady had finished.)

But there was another reason, subtly and darkly hinted at by the Allied High Command. What it was even the members of the expedition did not know. Suffice it to say that High Command, while welcoming the services of all fictional sleuths, had made out special requisitioning forms for three of them. One was Sir Henry Merrivale, because of his Secret Service contacts; the second was Slim Callaghan, because, so the authorities said, they were urgently in need of men who could take a beating lasting from three hours to three days and then needed merely a few fingers of rye and a few glances at a blonde to be at their top again. The third was the aged Baker Street genius, called back from his beekeeping retirement. It was rumored that the reason for his recall was the phenomenal increase in the number of varieties of cigarette ash in recent years — which was not at all surprising in view of what was considered smokable in the British army.

All this, however, is by the way. For we are not concerned with a crime solved, or even encountered, by Fictional Sleuths on their voyage, but

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one that occurred during — in fact, even because of — their absence.

Yet even the graying gentleman, now passing the office of the Immigration Officer, had at this moment no idea of what the crime would be. His plans were laid, admittedly. But at that very moment another gentleman — if you can call him that — was passing the office of another Immigration Officer. And with the stage thus set for the irresistible force to meet the immovable object, things were bound to happen that were to prove extremely disturbing to the peace and quiet of the members of the Stooges Club.

Somewhere in Southern England — as the war communiques used to put it — is the country estate of the Stooges Club. It is a pleasant stretch of country, one of those evergreen properties that seem to survive even the rigors of Socialization — a thing of beauty and a joy for the retired English gentleman.

Normally a scene of tranquil contemplation and serene unconcern with the rough and tumble of the day, the clubhouse was an antheap of activity on the morning the discovery was made. Going out for an early constitutional, one of the members of the Committee, a genial medico by name of Watson — John Hamish Watson, to be exact — had come across a charming little cottage, situated about half an hour's walk to the north of the clubhouse. Few of the members ever ventured there; only the more active among them ever bothered to climb the birch-forested little hill which separated that part of the estate from the main grounds. In fact, the only member to know these parts really well was a Captain Hastings, who was a great walker and almost an explorer — was he not known to take delight in climbing mountains and riding camels, habits on which his friend Hercule Poirot had often commented with considerable exasperation?

Be that as it may, on this fine morning the good doctor had ventured farther than was his wont and suddenly found himself gazing upon the neat little cottage, though he had noticed with wonderment that the windows, instead of being respectably shuttered, were secured with iron bars. His natural curiosity aroused, he had made an attempt to enter but found the entrance locked and, unless he was much mistaken, bolted from the inside. Looking through a window, he had perceived, to his horror, the unclothed body of a man lying on the floor, with a bullet wound in the cardiac region. Forgetting his usual caution, he had tried to enter through the window, but had found it as securely fastened as the door. He had thereupon returned to the clubhouse and informed Scotland Yard. His old friend Gregson not being available, Chief Inspector Parker had come down with some of his men.

Chief Inspector Parker, it should be said, was himself a member of the Stooges Club. However, in view of the

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scantiness of his stooging exploits, he was regarded by the regular members as a sort of outsider and had, in fact, never set foot on the grounds of the club. He knew few of the members personally and, in the circumstances, it was only natural that there was a certain coolness between him and the regular members of the Club. As the investigation progressed, the Inspector wished more than once that his famous brother-in-law, the eccentric Lord Peter, were present — if not to offer his assistance in the case (though this would have been most welcome, too), at least to infuse a little more jollity into the proceedings.

On his arrival at the clubhouse, Parker was introduced — if this is the right word to use when meeting a man without a name — to the President of the Club. The President, a silver-haired, very distinguished looking gentleman, was generally referred to as the "Friend of the Great Dupin." Some of the members inclined to the view that he was so old he had simply forgotten his name; but a better-informed minority, especially among the older members, maintained that he never had a name.

The President expressed his regret that, in view of his frailty and great age, he could not accompany the Chief Inspector to the scene of the crime; adding, somewhat unnecessarily, that, if only his friend Chevalier Auguste Dupin were present, the Inspector need not have been bothered at all. It was decided that Dr. Watson himself and a gentleman in riding breeches, of reddish complexion and rather pompous countenance, should guide the Inspector to the cottage.

"Ah, doctor," said the reddish gentleman, breathing deeply and with evident enjoyment, "*the air nimbly and sweetly recommends itself unto our gentle senses*. William of Avon, surely, was a great poet."

"I also had perceived that there was rain in the early morning," said the doctor reprovingly. "The rain, no doubt, has purified the air by killing undesirable bacteria."

To this Squire Randolph made no answer. Turning to Parker, he said: "For 60 years and more I have upheld the law. What little help I can give you in apprehending the wretch who did this miserable deed is yours, Chief Inspector. Modern methods I know not, though I feel that, if only you can look into a man's heart, the way Uncle Abner used to — ah, that's it. *If the assassination could trammel up the consequence and catch with his surcease, success*. Surely, William of Avon has stated the problem of every murderer."

"And has he also stated the problem of every detective?" asked the Inspector.

"He has," Squire Randolph said in great earnest. "*For murder though it have no tongue will speak with most miraculous organ*, but it takes a good man to understand its speech. This is the problem of the detective."

With this, the party came into sight of the cottage, and Parker had no further time for the exchange of

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literary pleasantries. There is little point in describing in detail the Inspector's movements, from the forcing of the locked and bolted door to the collecting of dust from the cottage. Parker made an accurate and exhaustive list of every detail of his findings, including the reports of his doctor, fingerprint man, ballistics and other experts; and this memorandum he discussed with the gentlemen constituting the Committee of the Stooges Club. Since the utter incomprehensibility — nay, impossibility — of the affair emerges most clearly from the Inspector's bald narrative, we shall follow him in merely stating the incontrovertible facts of the case.

"The corpse, gentlemen," the Inspector said, "is that of a man in his 50s, in pretty poor condition. It appears that the deceased had been suffering from some sort of throat trouble. When found, the corpse was stark naked and entirely hairless. Death, from a bullet wound in the heart, must have been instantaneous, or at least almost so, and undoubtedly occurred about twenty-four hours before the body was found. The bullet that killed him left the body again — there was an exit hole in the back of the corpse. The bullet, however, could not be found anywhere on the premises.

"Not only was no bullet found, there was no weapon either; and, above all, there was no blood except the crust of clotted blood covering the wounds."

Here Dr. Watson coughed. "It has been my experience, Inspector," he said, "that there is a certain type of cardiac wound in which hardly any loss of blood occurs. If the bullet . . ."

"I was not referring to hardly any loss of blood," said the Inspector. "There was no blood at all. Not a single spot could be found anywhere on the premises."

"Are we to presume then," interrupted a sporting-looking gentleman with an extremely empty face, "that the deceased, in his, em, unclothed state, was killed elsewhere?"

"I should be much obliged, Captain Hastings," Parker said with slight annoyance, "if you would allow me to finish my report before jumping to conclusions. Unless you are far more discerning than I am, you will soon see that the man could not possibly have been killed elsewhere — *just as he could not have been killed inside the cottage!*"

General commotion followed this fantastic matter-of-fact statement. "After you have eliminated the impossible . . ." Dr. Watson began.

"I have heard that one before," interrupted the Inspector. "And it was not your friend Sherlock Holmes, Doctor, who said it first, but the friend of your President."

Nodding assent, the friend of the Great Dupin asked Parker to continue.

"The body was lying on a rug in front of a bookcase, stocked with a wide variety of detective stories," said the Inspector. "Most of the vol-

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umes seemed to deal with sealed room mysteries — a rather thoughtful touch, in view of the circumstances. For, gentlemen, I wish to state most emphatically, there was no possible entrance or exit to the room in which the body was found.

"Let me give you an idea of the interior of the cottage. After I had forced the door which, as Dr. Watson correctly observed, was locked and bolted from the inside, I found myself in a small corridor, which, by the way, showed rather more dust than any of the other rooms. This was surprising inasmuch as two of the four rooms were without furniture and obviously unused. Of the other rooms, one was furnished as a study-*cum*-bedroom — this was the room in which the body was found — the other as a dining room. All rooms, as well as the kitchen, had iron bars in front of the windows — a precaution that seemed somewhat pointless in view of the little of value that, on examination, the cottage was found to contain. All the doors had ordinary locks — the two leading into the unused rooms were shut, the one to the dining room was open. But the door which served the study looked like a small fortress. It was secured by an ordinary lock with the key on the inside, a Yale lock and two iron bolts, also drawn on the inside. I tried and tested all the locks and bolts several times, and I assure you they were in perfect working order, and obviously freshly oiled.

"In the room with the body was a fireplace in which a fire had been lighted the night before — for what purpose I cannot say, unless the late inhabitant of the room was particularly sensitive to cold. The chimney above the fireplace is too narrow to admit even a dwarf — just in case you might consider the possibility of a vanishing act up the chimney.

"There is little I have to add. The two windows in the room were closed, their panes intact. Minute examination revealed no — I beg your pardon — no secret passage; my men went over every inch of the house. There were no visible mechanical contraptions from which a bullet might have been fired, although even if there were, it would be difficult to explain the absence of the bullet.

"Finally, one small but curious fact deserves mention, though it is doubtful whether it has any bearing on the case. There was a fair amount of flour dust inside the cottage, though you gentlemen have assured me that there is no mill in these parts for miles around."

"Has the body been identified?" The voice was that of a young girl.

"Unfortunately not so far, Miss . . ."

"Nikki Porter," said the girl.

"No, Miss Porter, nobody has come forward yet to make an identification. The face is an ordinary one and set in a grim scowl — not at all like the usual bland face you find in dead men."

"Oh, if only Ellery were here!" said the girl, hopelessly.

Chief Inspector Parker stiffened

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and resumed his narrative. "You will now realize, gentlemen, what we are up against. A dead body, killed by a bullet, is found in a — yes, I believe, I may use the term — hermetically sealed room. There is no weapon, no bullet, and no blood. The doctors assure us that death was practically instantaneous. But just in case you don't believe them —" he made an apologetic gesture toward Dr. Watson — "just in case you believe the deceased was walking about in the nude outside the cottage and, on being winged, managed to scuttle back to the safety of the house, lock and bolt the entrance, lock and bolt the study, and then expire on the rug before the bookcase, I must tell you that there were fresh fingerprints on the locks and bolts of both doors — and these fingerprints were *not* those of the deceased."

There was complete silence when the horrifying unreality of the thing penetrated the minds of his listeners. But the silence was broken by a booming voice which, in clear tones, rang out through the room: "*Can such things be and overcome us like a summer's cloud, without our special wonder?* Ah, Inspector, admit, William of Avon was a great poet indeed."

"I fear this is hardly the point at issue," the Inspector said, coldly. "Shakespearean analysis is more the domain of my brother-in-law, although, when I had the privilege of cooperating with him, he never apostrophized corpses in this, er, ebullient manner."

"You mentioned that the chimney was too small to admit a man," said the President, musingly. "Could it perhaps be that an ape . . . I seem to remember that the Great Dupin once deduced that . . ."

"It might have been an ape, of course," said the Inspector. "Armed with a revolver, the ape entered the cottage, shot the victim while the windows were open so that the bullet would go out without splintering the glass. The ape then closed the windows, drew the bolts, wiped the blood off the floor, and went up the chimney. We just have to look for that ape."

The President blushed to the roots of his silvery hair, while some of the younger and more frivolous of the stooges chuckled.

"I apologize for my rudeness, Mr. President," said the Inspector. "You are no doubt as bewildered as I am, and in that condition words come easily without thought. But let us tackle the matter systematically. I have here —" he took a volume out of his attaché-case — "a novel entitled *The Hollow Man.* It is written by Mr. John Dickson Carr and deals with the exploits of the justly famous Dr. Gideon Fell. It is one of the volumes which I found in the bookcase in the study."

"Dr. Gideon Fell? I never heard of the gentleman. A medico, you say?" exclaimed Dr. Watson. "If, now, you had mentioned the great Sherlock Holmes . . ."

"Nonsense," said Captain Hastings.

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"Wasn't he the man who crawled on his belly to collect cigarette ash and similar stupidities? My friend Hercule Poirot has often remarked . . ."

"The great Dupin . . . the only great detective who ever . . .," began the President with a faraway look on his face.

"You misunderstand me, gentlemen," the Inspector hastened to pour oil on the troubled waters. "What I intended to say is that this Dr. Fell — who, no doubt, cannot be compared with any of the gentlemen you mention — has, in the course of the novel *The Hollow Man*, spread himself on the subject of sealed rooms. It is a very thorough little monograph. He largely uses the discoveries made by other detective gentlemen and works these into a sort of lecture on the subject. It is from this lecture that I intend to quote, if you will kindly bear with me a little longer.

"Firstly, there is the crime committed in a room that is really hermetically sealed. There are various subdivisions, such as an accident that looks like murder, or suicide intended to look like murder, with the weapon whisked out of sight, or a melting icicle used as a stabbing instrument. There is murder by mechanical devices, and so on, *ad infinitum*, *ad libitum*, and *ad nauseam*. Quite obviously none of these applies. The man was not stabbed but shot, and all the other ingenious devices fail because of the absence of the bullet."

"Does not your authority mention the possibility that the man who forces an entrance to the room, murders the victim on that occasion, suggesting that the murder took place beforehand?" inquired a Gallic gentleman, who had been introduced as Monsieur Ricardo.

"You seem to overlook," said the Inspector, icily, "that I myself forced the door — two doors, in fact, in this case. And I assure you, the Yard does not teach us how to shoot a man in such a way that the bullet disappears, that he does not bleed, and that the doctors swear he has been dead for twenty-four hours.

"The other possibilities mentioned by Dr. Fell," Parker resumed his analysis, "are those in which the room only *appears* to be sealed. There are secret passages; bolts, locks, and windows are tampered with, and quite amazing tricks are worked with strings and mirrors. None, I am sorry to say, is of the slightest use in this case. To manipulate three locks and three bolts by any of these ingenious devices would take days — and even then the protruding knob of the Yale locks would impede the smooth running of the string. No," he closed the volume regretfully, "Dr. Fell doesn't help us much in this case."

"My friend Barnabas Hildreth has solved a number of cases," said a voice from the back, "in which unsuspected, though quite natural powers, were the agents of the crime. A bullet imbedded in an old log, a cup of . . ."

"Yes, but where is the bullet?" asked the Inspector.

"In this age of supernatural phe-

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nomena, of atomic power," said Ingram, "perhaps the bullet simply dissolved. It may have been . . ."

"The sun, of course, the sun!" Squire Randolph boomed. "I now remember that when Doomdorf was killed, Uncle Abner showed me the real murderer and would you believe it, it was . . ."

"Your sun, Squire, I am afraid, poses the same obstacles as the President's ape. No, this man was killed by human agency," said the Inspector, who was beginning now to enjoy the discussion.

"If you do not think me presumptuous, Inspector, may I make a suggestion?" inquired the polite voice of Dr. Watson. "I feel sure that my great teacher, my incomparable companion and friend, Sherlock Holmes, would have made an effort to extract the truth from the incontrovertible facts of the case. Thus, we know that a body, the body of a man killed by a bullet — pray, correct me if I am wrong — was found in a cottage in the grounds of the Stooges Club. We know, therefore, that the corpse — that is, the victim of this crime — must at some time or other have entered (a) these grounds and (b) the cottage, whether dead or alive. If, as was indeed the case, he was found where he . . ."

"Excellent," said Captain Hastings, admiringly.

"Elementary, my dear Hastings," said Dr. Watson.

"But it does not get us any further," said the Inspector, who seemed to have been struggling with a bout of coughing during Dr. Watson's recital. "Of course, the victim, dead or alive, entered the grounds as well as the cottage. We all know that houses can't fly so as to cover odd corpses strewn over the landscape."

As he said this, a shadow seemed to cross the face of Captain Hastings. His expression showed that he was thinking hard — a state of mind to which he was clearly unaccustomed. There was, he felt sure, something he ought to remember; a detail which, if only he could think of it, might alter the whole conception of the case.

But he just couldn't make it. Couldn't have been so important, after all, he concluded. Now, if Poirot had been here, it would have been different. But this Chief Inspector Parker was a bungler in any case — so what did it matter?

And thus the case was consigned, after a suitable interval, to the Department of Dead Ends. But whereas the DDE cases usually took on a new lease of life, this one didn't. And soon the Stooges Club went on as before — calm, serene, without unpleasantness.

Of all the participants in the strange affair at the Stooges Club only Dr. Watson ever learned the truth. It was not till several years later — in fact, on the afternoon that he visited the Sherlock Holmes exhibition at the Festival. The doctor was just ready to leave when a youngster of twelve or thirteen handed him a bulky envelope. "For you, Dr. Wat-

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son," he said. "There is no reply." And before the doctor had recovered from his surprise, the lad was gone.

The doctor eyed the envelope doubtfully, and opened it.

"Dear Dr. Watson," he read. "Leaving the doomed confines of Western Europe" — the doctor snorted at this opening — "for good, I feel that I owe you an explanation of the enigma at the Stooges Club some years back. Or rather, if I am quite honest about it — and who is more honest than the man of science? — I owe it to myself to unfold to you the details of an exploit which, though it was entirely unpremeditated, I regard with the same affection with which I feel Napoleon would have looked back on Austerlitz?

"When I saw *HMS Investigate* remove Sherlock Holmes and a host of lesser lights from the scene of action, I decided the time had come to put the final touches to certain plans which had been maturing for some time past. I need not go into details — in fact, it would be extremely unwise even at this late date to do so. Suffice it to say that the series of sensational spy trials which have shaken the Western world during the past four years are connected with my work.

"You may remember that about the same time the newspapers kicked up an unholy row about the presumed death of one Adolf Hitler, a fellow of pasty complexion, with a small mustache and a theatrical lock hanging down to his eyes. I mention these details because they are of importance in what is to follow. For it appears that this Adolf Hitler had succeeded in reaching England, notwithstanding the vigilance of the homeguard.

"When I found out — entirely by accident, I assure you — I at first tried to enlist the services of this man in my organization. Since, however, he proved recalcitrant, I was forced to liquidate him by methods which were rather more civilized than any he had employed during his lifetime; in fact, I merely shot him. This, however, placed me in a peculiar position in regard to the disposal of the body.

"The sensation which the finding of his corpse in England would have caused — in view of other claims that had been made, especially by the Russians — was diametrically opposed to my future plans. Of course, I could simply have burned the body or dumped it into the sea. But I am essentially an artist — every scientist is essentially an artist — and I could not bring myself to obliterate the memory of a man who, in popular esteem, had almost equalled my own reputation.

"If I could remove all identifying marks from the body and then have it found in such a way as to make the *who* of the victim entirely subordinate in interest to the *how* of the deed, I should, so to speak, have squared the circle. I would not be disturbed in my future plans, yet could at an opportune moment later on lay claim to my one deed which was sure to win universal acclaim. And thus the strange affair at the

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Stooges Club began to take shape.

"For, you see, the Stooges Club was the focal point of my plan. Where else would I find a crowd of half-wits — I am sorry, Doctor, for this vulgarism, but that's how it struck me at the time — who, while coming forward with the most fantastic suggestions, would overlook the one salient factor in the whole case — *the fact that there was a cottage in the morning where none had been the previous afternoon!*

"Surely you have seen the point by now, Doctor? The cottage at the Stooges Club was a *prefabricated* cottage. Everything fixed and ready — not just one of those army huts which first spring to mind when prefabricated houses are mentioned — but a complete house of four rooms and a kitchen, with outbuildings and everything; a few good workmen could knock up the thing in about four hours, all told.

"Naturally the house had to be erected where it would not cause any comment. At the Stooges Club I could be almost certain nobody would notice its sudden appearance, if only it looked old enough. So we scratched and scraped the cottage and made a fire — merely showing the chimney had been in use — and I even spattered some dust over the premises. An artistic error that, I admit; I only learned later that I should not have used flour dust in that locality.

"And the Stooges Club stood by me to a man. The observant Satterthwaite might perhaps have had sense enough to notice that something was amiss; but as luck would have it, he was gadding about the Riviera at the time, renewing acquaintance with his pre-war haunts. And the others — including even yourself, Doctor?

"It was almost too easy. We had a nice level foundation to work on — past the little hill with the birches the country turns completely flat. We struck no unexpected snags, and in the prescribed four hours the work was done. I had a last look at the stripped and shaven body of Adolf the Great, reposing peacefully on the rug in front of the bookcase; locked, bolted, and double-bolted the door and ditto the windows, and disappeared — *skyward!* All that remained to be done was to place the roof in position.

"And there I had a completely sealed room. No funny tricks with the door, no funny tricks with the windows, no secret passages — you and I, dear Doctor, surely would not stoop to secret passages. A corpse that was dead — really dead, if you know what I mean. No mechanical contraptions that could have shot him; no icicles that could have stabbed him. Nor could he have walked into the room already stabbed without knowing it — the last resort of the detective-story writer. For he was killed by an unarguable bullet from an unarguable army revolver.

"In short: *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

Yours affectionately,
Professor Moriarty"

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DYING MESSAGE DEPT.: *A Lump of Sugar*

by ELLERY QUEEN

IF NOT FOR THE FACT THAT MOUNTED Patrolman Wilkins was doing the dawn trick on the bridle path, where it goes by the Park Tavern, the Shakes Cooney murder would never have been solved. Ellery admits this cheerfully. He can afford to, since it was he who brought to that merry-go-round some much-needed horse sense.

A waiter with a hot date had neglected to strip one of his tables on the Tavern's open terrace at closing time the night before, whereupon the question was: Who had done a carving job on Cooney's so-called heart about 6 A.M. the next morning? Logic said nearly 8,000,000 people, or roughly the population of New York City, the law-abiding majority of whom might well have found Shakes Cooney's continued existence a bore. But Mounted Patrolman Wilkins was there when it counted, and it was he who collared the three gentlemen who, curiously, were in the neighborhood of the deserted Tavern and Cooney's corpse at that ungentlemanly hour.

Their collars were attached to very important necks, and when Inspector Richard Queen of police headquarters took over he handled them, as it were, with lamb's-wool knuckles. It was not every morning that Inspector Queen was called upon in a homicide to quiz a statesman, a financial titan, and an organization politician; and the little Inspector rose to the occasion.

Senator Kregg responded loftily, as to a reporter from an opposition newspaper.

Piers d'I. Millard responded remotely, as to a minority stockholder.

The Hon. Stevens responded affably, as to a party worker.

Lofty, remote, or affable, the three distinguished suspects in riding clothes agreed in their stories to the tittle of an iota. They had been out for an early canter on the bridle path. They had not addressed or seen any fourth person until the mounted policeman gathered them in. The life and death of Shakes Cooney were as nothing to them. Patrolman Wilkins's act in detaining them had been "totalitarian" — Senator Kregg; "ill-advised" — Financier Millard; "a sucker play" — Politician Stevens.

Delicately, Inspector Queen broached certain possibly relevant matters, *viz.*: In the national forest of politics, it was rumored, Senator Kregg (ex-Senator Kregg) was being measured as a great and spreading oak, of such timber as Presidents are

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made. Financier Piers d'I. Millard was said to be the Senator's architect, already working on the blueprints with his golden stylus. And small-souled political keyholers would have it that the Hon. Stevens was down on the plans as sales manager of the development. Under the circumstances, said the Inspector with a cough, some irreverent persons might opine that Shakes Cooney — bookie, tout, gambler, underworld slug, clubhouse creep, with the instincts of a jay and the ethics of a grave robber — had learned of the burial place of some body or other, the exhumation of which would so befoul the Senator's vicinity as to wither his noble aspirations on the branch. It might even be surmised, suggested Inspector Queen apologetically, that Cooney's price for letting the body stay buried was so outrageous as to cause Someone to lose his head. Would the gentlemen care to comment?

The Senator obliged in extended remarks, fortunately off the record, then he surged away. Prepared to totter after, Financier Millard paused long enough to ask reflectively, "And how long, did you say, Inspector Queen, you have been with the New York police department?", and it sounded like the *coup de grâce* to an empire. The Hon. Stevens lingered to ooze a few lubricating drops and then he, too, was gone.

When Ellery arrived on the scene he found his father in a good, if thoughtful, temper. The hide, remarked Inspector Queen, was pretty much cut-and-dried; the question was, To whose door had Shakes been trying to nail it? Because Shakes Cooney hadn't been a man to take his murder lying down. The evidence on the Tavern terrace showed that after his assailant fled Cooney had struggled to his hands and knees, the Tavern steak knife stuck in his butchered chest, and that he had gorily crawled — kept alive by sheer meanness, protested the Inspector — to the table which the preoccupied waiter had forgotten to clear off the night before; that the dying man had then reached to the table top and groped for a certain bowl; and that from this bowl he had plucked the object which they had found in his fist — a single lump of sugar. Then, presumably with satisfaction, Shakes had expired.

"He must have been one of your readers," said the Inspector. "Because, Ellery, that's a dying message or I'm the Senator's uncle. But which one was Shakes fingering?"

"Sugar," said Ellery absently. "In Cooney's dictionary sugar means —"

"Sure. But Millard isn't the only one of the three who's loaded with heavy sugar. The ex-Senator's well-stocked, and he recently doubled his inventory by marrying that greeting-card millionaire's daughter. And Stevens has the first grand he ever grafted. So Shakes didn't mean that kind of sugar. What's sugar mean in *your* dictionary, son?"

Ellery, who had left page 87 of his latest mystery novel in his typewriter,

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picked the lint off his thoughts. Finally he said, "Get me the equestrian history of Kregg, Millard, and Stevens," and he went back home to literature.

That afternoon his father phoned from Centre Street.

"What?" said Ellery, frowning over at his typewriter.

"About their horseback riding," snapped the Inspector. "The Senator used to ride, but he had a bad fall ten years ago and now he only punishes a saddle in the gym — the electrical kind. Moneybags hasn't been on the back of a plug since he walked out on Grandpa Millard's plowhorse in '88, in Indiana. Only reason Piers d'I. allowed himself to be jockeyed into those plushlined jodhpurs this morning, I'm pretty sure, is so he, Kregg, and Stevens could have a nice dirty skull session in the Park out of range of the newsreel cameras."

"And Stevens?"

"That bar insect?" snorted the old gentleman. "Only horse *he* knows how to ride is a dark one, with galluses. This morning's the first time Stevens ever set his suède-topped brogans into a stirrup."

"Well, well," said Ellery, sounding surprised. "Then what did Shakes mean? Sugar . . . Is one of them tied up with the sugar industry in some way? Has Kregg ever been conspicuous in sugar legislation? Is Millard a director of some sugar combine? Or maybe Stevens owns some sugar stock. Try that line, dad."

His father said wearily, "I don't need you for that kind of fishing, my son. That's in the works."

"Then you're in," said Ellery; and without enjoyment he went back to his novel which, like Shakes Cooney, was advancing on its hands and knees.

Two days later Inspector Queen telephoned his report. "Not one of them is tied up with sugar in any way whatsoever. Only connection Kregg, Millard, and Stevens have with the stuff is what I take it they drop into their coffee." After a moment the Inspector said, "Are you there?"

"Lump of sugar," Ellery mumbled. "And Shakes evidently thought it would be clear . . ." The mumble ended in a glug.

"Yes?" said his father, brightening.

"Of course," chuckled Ellery. "Dad, get a medical report on those three. Then let me know which one of 'em has diabetes."

The Inspector's uppers clacked against his lowers. "That's my baby! That's it, son! It's as good as wrapped up!"

The following day Inspector Queen phoned again.

"Whose father?" asked Ellery, running his fingers through his hair. "Oh! Yes, dad? What is it?"

"About the case, Ellery —"

"Case? Oh, the case. Yes? Well? Which one's diabetic?"

The Inspector said thoughtfully: "None."

"None! You mean —?"

"I mean."

"Hmm," said Ellery. "Hnh!"

For some time Inspector Queen

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heard nothing but little rumbles, pops, flutters, and other ruminative noises, until suddenly the line was cleared by a sound as definite as the electrocutioner's switch.

"You've got something," said the Inspector doubtfully.

"Yes. Yes," said Ellery, with no doubt whatever, but considerable relief. "Yes, dad, now I know whom Shakes Cooney meant!"

CHALLENGE TO THE READER: *You now have all the facts . . . To whom was Shakes Cooney pointing as his murderer?*

"Who?" demanded the Inspector.

"We ruled out all the reasonable interpretations of sugar," said Ellery, "leaving us where we started — with a lump of sugar in Cooney's clutch as a clue to his killer. Since the fancy stuff is out, suppose we take a lump of sugar in a man's hand to mean just that: a lump of sugar in a man's hand. Why does a man carry a lump of sugar with him?"

"I give up," said the Inspector promptly. "Why?"

"Why?" said Ellery. "Why, to feed it to a horse."

"Feed it to a —" The old gentleman was silent. Then he said, "So that's why you wanted to know their riding history. But Ellery, that theory fizzled. None of the three is what you'd call a horseman, so none of the three would be likely to have a lump of sugar on him."

"Absolutely correct," said Ellery. "So Shakes was indicating a fourth suspect, only I didn't see it then. Cooney was a bookie and a gambler. You'll probably find that this fellow was over his noggin in Cooney's book, couldn't pay off, and took the impulsive way out —"

"Wait, hold it!" howled his father. "*Fourth* suspect? What fourth suspect?"

"Why, the fourth man on the bridle path that morning. And he *would* be likely to carry a lump of sugar for his horse."

"*Mounted Patrolman Wilkins!*"

Note:

If you enjoy ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE you will like some of the other MERCURY PUBLICATIONS:

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

John Eugene Hasty's "Crime à la Carte" is one of the seven first stories which won special awards in EQMM's Seventh Annual Contest. We think you will agree that it is one of the funniest stories to appear in EQMM for some time. The author has a light, deft touch — the only dependable ingredient which will emulsify oil-of-crime and eau-d'humeur.

Mr. Hasty's career has been an interesting one. He was born shortly after the turn of the century in Lafayette, Indiana. His parents were the second generation of the family to be in show business, and young John himself made his theatrical debut at the age of six months in the role (type casting!) of a crying baby. Reviews credited him with a convincing and realistic performance.

After trouping for seven years, he went to school, but still spent his summer vacations in the theatre, and during high-school days he worked as a property man. It was at this time that he first began to write, turning out dramatic sketches and blackouts until the death of vaudeville forced him to channel his efforts in other directions. He did some news feature-writing, publicity, and eventually advertising. But the theatre was in his blood.

Came the dawn of radio, and Mr. Hasty promptly resigned his advertising agency job to pioneer in this new field of show business. As a writer-producer-director he achieved an outstanding success in radio, devoting his talents to such shows as "The Shadow," "The Whistler," and "Suspense," and originating the Victor Moore Show and "Dr. Christian."

Then came the dawn of television, and again Mr. Hasty became a pioneer. He had already worked in the rich vineyards of Hollywood, on everything from musicals to mystery pictures, but with the upswing in television he found himself irresistibly drawn to this new and vital medium. One of his television scripts, "Wine of Oropalo," won the N.B.C. Tele-Theatre Award. At the time Mr. Hasty wrote his first short story, he was head of the Radio and Television Department of the West Coast offices of one of the largest advertising agencies in the world.

And so, with "Crime à la Carte," John Eugene Hasty enters a new field — that is, new for him. His first short story marks an auspicious debut. We wish Mr. Hasty all the best, and hope that he will become a steady contributor to the magazine whose proudest record is the large number of new writers it has introduced to the public.

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CRIME À LA CARTE

by JOHN EUGENE HASTY

MUCH AS I DISLIKE SAYING SO, we're pretty backward here in Milford. As a quick illustration, about a year ago some economists, who had a marvelous plan for doing something or other with somebody else's money, came down to take a public opinion poll; and they sent around questionnaires asking us if we didn't think their plan was a fine idea. Well, practically the whole town gave the wrong answer. Later on, the survey was written up in one of the big magazines to prove that the average American small town — even when reached by Walter Winchell and Drew Pearson — is almost hopelessly out of touch with the current scene.

Oh, a select few of us here, like the Walburton Pryces and the Marshal Claytons, do manage to keep up; but Milford folks as a whole are definitely passé, and without doubt the passéest are Willie Hosmer and his brother Al, proprietors of Hosmer's Diner.

The diner stands on Main Street, between Fifth and Sixth, practically in the center of town, and among our better people it's regarded as an architectural monstrosity and a misstep in the march of progress. In fact, Howard Geiger, who if not an intellectual is at least an alert young businessman, once tried to convince Willie and Al that apart from displaying civic spirit they'd save money by closing the place.

Al, who is the dumber of the two and slightly hard of hearing besides, stays in the kitchen most of the time; so it was Willie with whom Howard made contact. In an intelligence test, Willie wouldn't assay very high. He's a spare, mournful individual, with moist, drooping mustaches, and a sliding Adam's apple. He stood there, mopping the counter with the end of his apron, as Howard briefed the situation. The diner holds only eighteen customers at a time; and with each customer taking a half-hour to eat, the greatest number the diner could serve, during the conventional lunch hour, is obviously 36. Balancing the estimated gross receipts from 36 customers against the cost of food, labor, utilities, maintenance, taxes, and depreciation, the diner was actually losing between $20 and $30 every single lunch period.

Inescapable as the conclusion was, Willie Hosmer failed to grasp it. Even when Howard Geiger took a location across the street and opened the Cafe Moderne, with a tile front, plateglass windows, and a smart neon sign, Willie and Al continued to hang on. They were simply too ignorant to realize they were finished, which of course they would have been if the

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Cafe Moderne hadn't gone out of business.

What kept the diner going at all was the subject of considerable speculation. Nobody patronized the place, except a handful of local roughnecks, and a few truck drivers who passed through town, and stopped for a steak, or ham and eggs, and a slab of Al's blueberry pie. The latter, although served only now and then, has somehow achieved a reputation. Its appearance on the menu posted in the diner windows is usually sufficient to bring a passing truck to a halt.

Nobody knows why. As Mrs. Walburton Pryce put it, it's only virtue lies in the fact that it gives a person heartburn immediately instead of waking him up in the middle of the night.

Now, exactly when these two fellows, Michelson and Tatum, arrived in town, I don't know. As I understand it, Michelson came first. He was a nice-appearing young man, very polite and affable, who planned to open an office — something to do with insurance. He spent quite a little time making contacts and asking advice; and as advice is just about the easiest thing in the world to get in Milford, Michelson picked up plenty of it. Within a week or two, he knew everybody who was in business, and why, and how much money they were taking in. Then Tatum appeared; and the two of them took space in the Wilder Building. The name on their office door read *Mammoth Protective Association.*

Even then it wasn't generally known what the Mammoth Protective Association really was. It didn't come out until Oliver's Clothing Store window was smashed one night, and a lot of merchandise ruined, and Oliver had sworn out a warrant for Michelson's arrest. Michelson showed up at the hearing, cool and unruffled, and frankly admitted he had talked to Oliver about signing up with the Protective Association. But he denied any connection between that discussion and the smashed window. After all, there was nothing so unusual about a window being broken, was there? It was just one of those things.

The case was dismissed for lack of evidence; but the incidents continued to happen. About two weeks later there was another window smashing — this time Barnett's Hardware Store. And two evenings after that, Frank Hines was found lying unconscious beside his car in the parking area behind his real estate office.

Unlike Clem Oliver, neither Barnett nor Frank Hines brought Michelson's name into the discussion of their mishaps. On the contrary, they seemed to avoid it. Barnett guessed the window must have been broken by hoodlums; and Hines said that as nearly as he could remember he'd slipped and fallen, and had hit his head on the bumper of the car. There were quite a few other businessmen, too, who, when the Protective Association was mentioned, grew sud-

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denly silent, or remembered something that needed their immediate attention somewhere else.

With everyone refusing to talk, there was nothing that could be done legally; so a few of us decided to handle the matter in our own way. We called on the Mammoth Protective Association. Michelson wasn't in, but we found Tatum — a short, thickset, dark-complexioned man, with an unlighted cigar wedged in the corner of his mouth. He sat with his hat pulled down over his eyes, and his feet cocked up on the desk, while Reverend Tussong, whom we'd chosen as spokesman, said what he had to say:

"You understand, Mr. Tatum, we're making no accusations. These unfortunate occurrences may be mere coincidences. However, one can't help being aware that in all these instances the parties had been offered your protection service, and had refused it. And that, coupled with the fact that heretofore Milford has always been a law-abiding community and free from such disturbances, at least constitutes grounds for conjecture. We're not threatening you in any manner, Mr. Tatum. We are giving you fair warning that these *coincidences* must stop."

Tatum dropped his feet to the floor and swiveled around in his chair.

"Look, padre," he said, "we're running a legitimate business. If you fellows think you've got something to squawk about, and can prove it, take it up with the law. I'm not making any threats, either. But I've known guys who went around looking for trouble; and they always found it. Now, is that all?"

That seemed to be all. We filed out without saying much to each other.

It was about this time that Michelson paid a visit to Willie Hosmer. Willie listened, but he didn't think the diner could afford protection.

"You see, Mr. Michelson," he said, "me and Al ain't exactly young fellows any more. Both of us are pushin' 60 — and we have a hard time makin' a bare living outta this business. Fact is, for the last coupla months we been losin' money."

"That's one of the best reasons why you need our service," Michelson told him. "If you had a lot of money in the bank, you could carry your own risk. You could afford to take a chance. But with no protection at all — Well, it's only a suggestion, but talk it over with your partner. I'll drop around and see you again Wednesday morning."

Now it happened that on Wednesday morning, Al was counting the cash in the cash register when a dime slipped from his fingers, rolled along the floor, and disappeared into a small hole in the baseboard behind the counter. The hole was something Al hadn't noticed before, although from other evidence he had already suspected the presence of a mouse, and, in fact, had suggested to Willie that they acquire a cat.

So he stopped to examine the hole, not without considerable effort, because Al is about as wide as Willie is

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long — a paunchy, puffy, little man, with thinning gray hair, and a hard, round, red face. He was in this squatting position when Michelson came into the diner.

As I mentioned, Al is a little deaf; so he didn't hear the door open and close. He first became aware that he was not alone when Michelson said, "Hello. I'm Michelson from the Mammoth Protective Association. I guess you're Al Hosmer. I was talking to your brother and he tells me you aren't doing so well."

Al straightened up. "How's that?"

"I say you've been losing money."

"I'll say! A whole dime! And all on account of a blamed mouse."

Michelson looked puzzled. "I don't think you get me. I'm talking about your business here — the diner. Where does the mouse come in?"

"Right there through that hole."

This left Michelson still baffled, but he went on. "Okay, but I'm here to talk about giving you protection."

"You're too late," Al said.

"How do you mean I'm too late?"

"We're gonna get us a cat."

Irritation edged Michelson's voice as he said, "Look, chum, let's just forget about that now. I'm here —"

"Do what?" Al interrupted.

"Forget it! Leave the cat out!"

"Well, who let her in?"

"Nobody let her in!" Michelson shouted, "There isn't any cat!"

"I know it," Al said, "That's why we gotta get one."

Michelson took a long, deep breath. He had encountered all types of prospects — antagonistic, stubborn, mild, evasive, frightened — and he knew exactly how to deal with each one of them; but Al Hosmer puzzled him. He decided on patience, lowered his voice, and spoke slowly.

"Listen, my friend, I'm a salesman."

Al nodded; and Michelson went on, "And I'm selling something you fellows need. It's pretty big and important — and I want to talk to you about it."

"Well, you can talk all you want to," Al said, "but it won't do you no good. I don't care how big it is. One cat ain't no more important than another."

"But I'm not —!"

"And I ain't *buyin'* no cat anyhow. I can get one for nothin'. And as far as that goes, I'd ruther have a little one. It won't eat so much."

Again Michelson found himself shouting. "I'm not selling cats! I haven't any big ones *or* little ones! This proposition —"

"What say?"

"I haven't any little ones!"

Al looked at him benignly. "Well, don't worry about it. After all, you're young yet."

Michelson gave up. He said wearily, "Here — here's a contract. It explains everything. Have your brother read it over. I'll come back sometime when *he's* here."

He was in no amiable mood when he reached the office, and his mood was not improved by his conversation with Tatum, who couldn't under-

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stand why he'd come back with the deal still not closed.

"Why, they're a couple of yokels," Tatum said, "a pair of pushovers! What's holding you up?"

"I'm telling you he didn't even understand what I was talking about! He thought I was trying to sell him a cat."

"A what?"

"A cat."

"Just cut the kidding."

"I'm not kidding."

"Then you must be nuts. How could he get the idea you're selling cats? Nobody sells cats."

"You don't have to tell me!" Michelson exploded, "I've heard all about it!" He dropped into a chair. "That guy must be the village idiot."

"Funny he couldn't understand you. From the way you're talking, you both speak the same language."

"Meaning what?"

"If you see a meaning you like," Tatum said, "help yourself. Why didn't you give him a punch on the nose? He'd have understood that, all right."

"Oh, fine! And get booked on an assault-and-battery charge. The way we stand in this town that's just about all I need to be doing time the rest of my life. Why don't *you* go over there and punch him on the nose?"

Tatum chewed thoughtfully on his cigar.

"I figured I'd have to take over sooner or later," he said. "All right, I'll go over. And I'll come back here with a signed contract."

That was the night someone hurled a rock through one of the diner windows. Willie and Al were pasting a piece of wrapping paper over the broken pane when Tatum strolled in.

"Looks like you boys have been having a little trouble," he said, "I guess I dropped around at just the right time. My name's Tatum. My partner Michelson says he left a contract for you to read over."

Willie looked up with a vaguely troubled expression, then went on applying the paper to the glass. It was Al who replied.

"What kinda contract?"

"Mammoth Protective Association."

"What's a mammoth?" Al asked.

"I know what it is," Willie said, "I looked it up in the dictionary. It's a sorta elephant."

"Seems to me an elephant oughta be big enough to protect himself," Al said.

Tatum didn't propose to let this go farther. He said firmly, "Mammoth is just the name. The association protects you."

"Well, yuh see, it's this way, Mister," Willie said, gently smoothing down the paper with the palm of his hand, "we ain't really bothered much by elephants."

"Nope, there ain't been an elephant around here," Al added, "since the last circus."

Tatum's eyes went hard and his lips tightened into a thin, straight line. He took a quick, menacing step toward Al, and stood close to him.

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"Shut up about circuses! Now, here—" he pulled a contract form from his pocket and thrust it into Al's hand, "if you want to keep out of trouble, sign that."

Al unfolded the document and held it out at arm's length. His gaze moved with maddening slowness across the type. Then he carefully folded the contract and extended it to Tatum.

"Mislaid my glasses this morning," he said. "I can't make out a word of it."

With a swift movement Tatum whipped the contract out of Al's hand and poked it at Willie. "You read it!"

"Yes — yes, o' course," Willie said. He studied the text for a long, long time, turning the paper over, turning it back again.

"Well?" Tatum snapped impatiently, "What's the matter?"

"Says here it costs $150."

"That's right."

Al shook his head doubtfully. "That's a lot of money."

"It's cheap," Tatum said.

"I say it ain't."

"Oh, stop arguin' with the man, Al," Willie put in, "If he says an elephant costs $150, more'n likely he's right."

"I'm not talking about an elephant," Tatum shrieked.

Willie regarded him with severity. There was a chiding note in his voice as he said, "Now, see here, young man, it's about time you made up your mind just what you *are* talking about. Me and Al have got things to do. There's a basketball game at the high school tonight, and they'll all be pilin' in here in a little while, wantin' hamburgers and hot dogs."

"I do know what I'm talking about," Tatum roared, "I'm talking about protection. And $150 is peanuts."

Al cupped his hand behind his ear. "How's that?"

"Peanuts!" Tatum's voice broke on the word, and it came out in a high-pitched squeak. "Peanuts!"

"Oh! Peanuts!" Al said, "For you or the elephant?"

Tatum passed his hand across his forehead; it came away damp. This was incredible, completely fantastic. He made a desperate attempt to regain the ice-cold, granite composure. "Don't try to be funny, Pop. I know one funny guy who ended up with holes in his coat."

The light of understanding suddenly dawned in Willie's eyes. "Oh, yes! Say, I see what you mean now. Well, you might have something there, young fellow. Because the same thing happened to me. My best overcoat, too. Moth holes as big as quarters." He turned to Al, and repeated the word, "Moths!"

"I don't get it," Al replied. "Somebody musta changed the subject."

Tatum inhaled noisily. His face grew red, his voice husky and frantic. "Never mind whether you get it or not! Sign that contract or the next thing that comes through your window won't be a rock!"

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"You mean it'll be moths?"

"I mean you'll be gettin' a nice package of dynamite!"

Al looked at Tatum calmly. "It don't make sense," he commented, "usin' dynamite just to get rid of a moth."

Tatum didn't try to answer. He glanced around the diner, his gaze finally resting on the clock. The hands stood at twenty minutes to 10. Any moment now the place would be overrun with high-school kids. Whatever plan he was considering, he finally decided against it. He moved to the door.

"Don't think you're putting anything over on me," he said, "because I'll be seeing you later. And you'd better have your names signed to that contract.

Then he went out.

Tatum walked rapidly to the Wilder Building, fuming and sweating from the pressure of his thoughts. In front of the office door he stopped and took out his keys. Then he noticed the light behind the glass panel, and jammed the keys back into his pocket. The light meant Michelson was there; and at this particular moment Tatum wasn't keen about encountering his partner. He hesitated for an instant, turned the knob.

Michelson was getting ready to keep a date. He stood at the mirror that hung over the wash basin in the corner, brushing his hair. Tatum gave him a malevolent glance, eased himself into the desk chair, and said nothing. He could see Michelson's reflection in the mirror, and Michelson was grinning sardonically. He was still grinning when he turned around.

"Well? Got the contract?"

"No, but I'll get it."

"Sure you will," Michelson said. His voice was a soft, gentle purr — a gentle purr delicately blended with venom. "Oh, sure. But just to make conversation, *why* didn't you get the contract? Those two lamebrains didn't talk you out of it, did they? Not a smart operator like you."

"Shut up!" Tatum said.

"A highly intelligent reply," Michelson went on, "Well thought out. Forceful, too. Shows you mean business. I can see why you get along so sweetly with the Hosmer boys."

Tatum got up suddenly. "I told you to shut up!"

A remnant of the smile lingered on Michelson's lips, but his voice was cold and contemptuous. "Listen, my cauliflower-eared friend, that hard-boiled stuff you get out of the movies might go swell with the local yokels. Maybe they believe it. But I don't go to pictures, so I'm not impressed. And if you want a slap on the kisser —"

Tatum took a quick step forward and drove a hard right jab into Michelson's midsection. The breath went out of Michelson. He made a wild grab for Tatum's left which was already on its way. The blow caught him in the mouth. He staggered back, stumbled over a wastebasket, and sat down heavily on the floor. He continued to sit there for a moment,

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dabbing with his handkerchief the corner of his mouth which was bleeding a little. Tatum, breathing heavily, walked over and perched on the edge of the desk, one leg hanging in the air. There was a crumpled package of cigarettes lying there; he took one and lit it. He said, "You asked for it."

Michelson didn't reply. He got up, crossed the room, and examined his lip in the mirror. It had stopped bleeding now. He put his handkerchief in his pocket, smoothed down his hair, picked up his hat, and let himself out the door.

Now, thus far, these events have been reported from hearsay, and the account may err occasionally as to detail; but the remainder of what occurred that night comes from reliable and on-the-spot witnesses. Around 11 o'clock it began to rain — not a forthright downpour, but a dismal, disagreeable drizzle that dampened your spirits as well as your clothes. By 11:30 Main Street was deserted and dark, except for the blurred light from the widely spaced row of street lamps, gleaming mistily through the black drops of rain.

At the diner, Willie was stacking dishes behind the counter, and Al was hanging the next day's menu signs in the window, when the door opened suddenly, slamming back against the wall. In the doorway stood Tatum. He was wearing a raincoat that had a large wet splotch across the shoulders, and a tiny rivulet of water dribbled off his hat. He closed the door and took three swift steps to the counter. His face seemed stiff and hard and strangely twisted, and his voice sounded gravelly and hoarse.

He said, "Lemme have that contract."

Willie put down a stack of saucers. "Well — uh — we're gettin' ready to close up, Mister. Why don't you come around in the morning?"

"I want it now," Tatum said, "and with your signatures on it." His hand slid smoothly inside his raincoat and emerged holding a stubby, black, efficient-looking automatic. "Get it!"

"Oh, I'll get it," Willie answered, regarding the automatic with an expression of sadness. "But you know, doncha, you ain't allowed to carry a gun."

"That's right," Al said from the window, "It's agin' the law."

Tatum turned slightly, keeping both men in the arc covered by the gun. "What are you doing there?"

"Puttin' up tomorrow's menu."

"Get over behind the counter."

"Just a second till I —." Al fumbled through the placards that bore the names of culinary items, then glanced inquiringly at Willie. "We havin' corned beef tomorrow?"

"Ham," Willie said.

Al selected a card and placed it in the window.

"You heard me," Tatum snarled, "Get away from there." With the automatic he waved Al back behind the counter. "Okay, now where's the contract?"

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"I stuck it back of the coffee urn there," Willie said, "Hand it to me, Al."

The space behind the coffee urn served as a convenient catch-all, and Al was a little time finding the contract. He brought it to the counter.

"Here it is, but I ain't read it yet, and I ain't signin' it till I do."

Tatum reached across, gathered a handful of Al's shirt, and jerked him against the counter.

"Why, sure," Tatum said, "we wouldn't ask anybody to sign up with us unless they was sold on the idea."

He released his hold, but held the gun close as his left hand fumbled inside his raincoat and found a pen.

"Here — any time you're ready."

Al took the pen, glanced at Willie, then at the door. Rain streamed down the outside of the glass, darkness pressed against it. Quiet filled the room. Al signed.

Tatum slid the paper and pen along the counter to Willie.

"How about you? Think it over, Pop. We want you to be satisfied."

Willie affixed a wobbly signature.

"All right," Tatum said. "This is a legal contract, and you signed it of your own free will. So don't try to make a squawk about it. All you'll get for yourself is trouble. Your first month's dues is 150 bucks. I'll collect them right now."

"We ain't got that much in the till," Willie said.

"A hundred and fifty dollars. Get it."

Willie moved sidewise to the cash register, keeping a wary gaze on Tatum. He pressed a key. The drawer clanged open. Al started to sidle toward him. Tatum swung the automatic a trifle.

"You stay where you are, and keep your hands above the counter where I can see 'em."

Al raised his arms shoulder-high. From somewhere came the throb of a motor and the sound of brakes. Light glowed behind the rain-splattered windows.

"Hurry up with that dough," Tatum shouted.

Willie turned from the cash register just as the door opened. The man framed in the doorway wore khaki pants and a leather jacket over a flannel shirt. He took one look at Tatum, and dived. Tatum whirled, and caught the man's shoulder squarely in the stomach. The gun flew from his hand and skidded a few feet across the floor. The two men went down. Tatum in a half-sitting position, back against the counter, with the man's arms pinning him around the thighs.

They struggled for a fraction of a second, Tatum writhing, turning this way and that, trying to push himself up. He freed one hand for a swing, and felt his fist jar against the side of the man's jaw. The man's grasp relaxed. Tatum arched himself upward to throw the man off, rolled over, snatched the gun from the floor, and then came up on his hands and knees. The man scrambled to his feet, crouched.

Tatum rose slowly. His eyes, bright

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and hard, looked out of a face that worked convulsively. The automatic now dangled from his hand. He spat on the floor. Then he raised the muzzle of the gun. But he heard no explosion. For suddenly sharp pain vibrated dizzily through his skull, and brilliant flashes of yellow light danced before his eyes. His jaw dropped open; he slumped quietly down in front of the counter.

When the police arrived, Tatum was still lying there in a pool of crimson — only it wasn't quite the proper shade for blood. And Al Hosmer was still clutching the neck of a broken ketchup bottle.

Well, that's just about all there is to tell. Along with Willie and Al and Chet Morley, the truck driver who thought he'd walked in on a holdup, the prosecutor produced seven witnesses who testified they'd been threatened and coerced into signing up with the Mammoth Protective Association. And on top of that, Michelson himself turned state's evidence. It took the jury less than ten minutes to bring in a verdict of guilty on all counts. Tatum got ten years, and later, at a separate trial, Michelson drew three.

So the whole town was pleased, with the possible exception of Chet Morley. His complaint hinged upon the allegation that the headlights of his truck had shown directly on the diner window where there was a sign unmistakably reading *Special Today — Blueberry Pie.* He had stopped deliberately because of that sign, envisaging a thick, juicy slab of the pastry and a hot cup of coffee. After the excitement was over, he discovered that blueberry pie was not on the menu. And considering the chance he took in jumping a man with a gun, he certainly was justified in feeling a bit piqued over the whole situation.

You know, it *would* take somebody like Willie and Al Hosmer to make a mistake like that. Imagine those dumb clucks putting up a sign advertising blueberry pie — when blueberries weren't even in season!

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MURDER IS EVERYBODY'S BUSINESS

by HELEN McCLOY

SHE STOOD AT THE FOOT OF THE broad stairs, one hand on the newel post, looking up into the shadows on the floor above. "Mother? Peter? Here I am — Amy!"

A sense of inertia came through the silence. The house was empty. Amy was hardly surprised. She realized she had been foolish to imagine they would stay in because she was coming home. That wasn't like them at all. Peter might be anywhere, but her mother was probably having tea with Esther Gregory.

Amy crossed the hall to the telephone table and found the Gregorys' number in the book. Time enough to call Allan after she had talked to her mother.

While the open line buzzed and clicked against her ear, she looked down at her cigarette, harsh white against the golden-brown of her skin. She could almost hear her mother's voice: "*Such a deep tan isn't fashionable any more. Really, it's almost darker than your hair. And your nails! Just like a boy's — short, blunt, unpolished. Yet you have nicely shaped hands. One of your few good points. They'd be all right if you took care of them. Oh, if only you had been the boy, and Peter the girl! He has all the charm and you have all the brains. It isn't fair to me. . . .*"

"Operator, I'm still waiting for that number. Will you try it again?"

"Oh, didn't you get them? I'm sorry. Just a minute, please."

More buzzing. . . . What proportion of their lives did people waste nowadays waiting for someone else to answer the telephone?

There was a click, and a man's voice spoke, musical, a gentle, Negro voice: "Hello."

"Is Mrs. Corbett there? This is her daughter."

"Just a minute, please, I'll see if she's down at the stables."

Since when had the Gregorys acquired a Negro butler and stables? Over the light humming of the wire she heard footfalls ring on a hard surface and die away. A cat was wailing at the other end of the line, sharp, nasal wailing. A Siamese? Here in the hall where Amy sat there was no

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sound but the surf and one shrill cry from a gull. This summer home was built on a dune, overlooking the sea. Double doors at either end stood open to the sunny, windy emptiness of sand hills.

Over the telephone line footfalls rang again on a hard surface. Another voice spoke — a white man's voice: "This is dangerous. I don't . . ."

A woman's voice answered, high, rapid, clear, and rather cool: "We've got to. . . . Where's the Nembutal?"

"In my pocket." The man's voice was deep and hoarse.

Amy tried to interrupt: "Hello? Hello? Is this a crossed wire?"

The voices went on. These two could not hear Amy. Only some words were distinct, not complete sentences; as though the pair stood at some distance from the telephone. Not a crossed wire. Just two people talking in the same room as the telephone, unaware that someone else had left it off the hook. Amy was reaching for the telephone cradle to break the connection when the woman said, "I've been wondering . . . better a lethal dose . . . ?"

"No! That . . . suggests murder . . . or suicide. . . . We'll . . . enough . . . befuddle senses and . . . they'll call it accident. I wish . . . over!"

"Do you suppose I'm enjoying . . . ?"

"Sometimes . . . think you do."

"I'm not that tough, but . . ."

"You're the toughest woman I know . . . Why I love . . ."

"I'm not . . . even talking . . . frightens me."

"Why? No one can overhear . . . big room like this . . . 30 feet to that door. You can . . . terrace from the picture window . . . no one outside."

"Things . . . more real . . . put them into words. Murder . . . What a word for people like you and me to . . ."

"Somehow . . . doesn't seem like murder when . . . you and I."

"I know . . . Didn't seem like adultery when it was you and I . . . Have you thought . . . when? What about . . . tonight . . . ? Sooner the better. If . . ." The woman's voice faltered now, a little breathless. "If anything should go . . . wrong, I hope . . . adjoining cells before . . . the end."

The man's answer came harshly: "Some prisons . . . men; others, for women. If . . . goes wrong, we'll never meet again."

". . . meet in hell." Her laugh was cold and bitter.

"Paolo and Francesca? Then hell will be heaven!"

He had matched her mood, yet her response was acid: "None, I think, do there embrace . . ."

Suddenly the voices ceased. There was only a faint humming. The line was dead.

Frantically, Amy jiggled the lever. "Operator, I was cut off. Give me that number again. Oldport nine seven four."

A woman's voice answered this

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time, a voice spiced with Irish brogue: "Mr. Gregory's residence."

"I — I called a moment ago. I was cut off. May I speak to the man who answered the telephone then? He was a Negro, a butler, I suppose."

"There's some mistake, ma'am," the voice answered her cheerfully. "There are no butlers here and no Negroes."

"Then the operator must have given me a wrong number that first time. May I speak to Mrs. Corbett? This is Miss Corbett."

"Mrs. Corbett isn't here now, ma'am, and she's not expected."

"Oh, thank you." Amy jiggled the lever. "Operator, that first call was a wrong number."

"I'm sorry, madam. Excuse it, please."

"You don't understand. I'm not blaming you. I just wanted to know what that wrong number was. It's important."

"But, madam!" The operator was bewildered. "If it was a wrong number, it was a mistake. I did it without knowing it. I can't tell you something I don't know myself, can I?"

"Oh! Then give me six five three." But no one answered that number at all.

Twenty minutes later Amy tried again.

"Dr. Galt is not here now," said a woman's voice with a tart Yankee twang. "But — Oh, wait a minute! I think I hear his car just coming into the drive."

"Amy!" Allan Galt's welcome was cordial. "I had no idea you were coming back today. When can I see you?"

"Right away. Unless you're busy."

"Something wrong? You sound upset."

"I am. Something queer just happened. I need advice."

"I'll be there as soon as I can. I have a few more house visits to make."

Amy put down the telephone. Through the open doorway she could see dune shadows turning blue in the sand hollows, while the sunlight that lingered at the level of each crest was taking on its late afternoon luster, bright, still, golden. The day was dying, as summer itself was dying at this time of year. She shivered, suddenly aware of the threat of winter and night.

Have you thought . . . when? What about . . . tonight?

Amy frowned. Why was she so sure she had heard that woman's voice before, somewhere, some time?

Upstairs, slipping into a white piqué dress, she heard footfalls below. Allan already? It was little more than half an hour since she had telephoned him. She ran to the head of the stairs. A single lamp was lit in the dark hall below. Within its circle of light a flash of sapphires drew her gaze to her mother's hands, arranging flowers in a vase on the table. Pale, slender hands, tipped with rose-petal nails.

"Why, Amy! I had totally forgotten you were coming today. You might have reminded me!"

"I did try to reach you by telephone when I got here."

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"Dear child, that was thoughtful!" Natalie Corbett beamed at her daughter as if she meant every word. In a way, she did. That was the funny part. It wasn't quite the special compassion a mother feels for a child who is crippled or defective. It was rather the deprecating tolerance a breeder of dogs feels for the one puppy in a thoroughbred litter that hasn't enough points to make the bench show. *Poor little brute, no form at all! But he is faithful and affectionate, so I do make rather a pet of him.* . . . A girl who dressed carelessly as well as simply, a girl who would rather go to a play than a debutante dance, a girl who treated ineligible men as if they were eligible. . . . Well, it was trying, all Natalie's friends agreed.

"I wish you'd worn a prettier dress, dear," Natalie was saying. "And as for that lipstick! The wrong color for your eyes. And crooked. There's a new shade upstairs on my dressing table that Esther Gregory gave me. *Vin Rose.* Do run upstairs and try it. I don't suppose there's any use suggesting you try the nail polish that goes with it?"

"No, there isn't." Amy smiled. "I told you why I stopped wearing nail polish, Mother. At college I developed an allergy to it quite suddenly after having used it for years."

"You never mentioned such a thing," exclaimed Natalie.

"Yes, I did, Mother," Amy said. "You've forgotten. I didn't talk too much about it. I believe people don't talk about their allergies until they're cured. It's humiliating to know that you're so vulnerable to things normal people use without any trouble."

"Thank goodness, nothing like that ever happened to me!" Natalie regarded her pearly pink nails with satisfaction. "That Allan Galt is here. He seems most anxious to see you. If I were you I wouldn't hurry out to the terrace. I'd keep him waiting. A little finesse on your part wouldn't be out of place at all!"

Amy sighed. "Mother, you know I can't finesse with anybody and I don't want to!"

"As you please!" Natalie shrugged as she moved toward the terrace door.

Amy hesitated on the threshold. The terrace seemed crowded, though actually there were only eight people. Natalie had gone over to the cocktail table. No one noticed Amy in the darkness. She recognized her sister-in-law's fair, fluffy hair and kitten eyes, wide apart, round and wisely wondering. Peter's wife was sitting apart from the others, and that seemed odd. Amy slipped into a vacant chair beside her. "Hello, Kate!"

"Why, Amy! I didn't know you were back. How nice!"

"Only for a week. Where's Peter?"

"Over there at the table with your mother, mixing cocktails."

Now she had been told where to look, Amy picked out her brother's figure in the shadows. Peter was like his mother, slim, neat, almost dapper. In the darkness, beyond the lamplight that spilled through the hall doorway,

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another woman sat on a wicker settee with two men. Amy could see only a whiteness of face and throat and arms against a drift of black dress. The hair must be dark indeed, for it blended with the night. The black lace of a mantilla would have been invisible without a crescent of diamonds that glittered through its mesh.

Kate's glance followed Amy's. "That's Esther Gregory."

"I've known Curtis Gregory for years," said Amy. "But I think the only time I met Esther was at their wedding in town two years ago. She was a widow, wasn't she?"

"Yes. A Mrs. Maitland from San Francisco. She's become a great friend of your mother's down here."

"I've heard about that."

Just then the woman's laugh rippled, light but thin and chill, as the ring of a crystal goblet tapped by a fingernail.

Kate spoke quietly: "I don't like her, because Peter likes her so much, I suppose. But she's got a husband. Why does she want all the other men to dance attendance on her as well? Even Allan."

"That doesn't sound like Allan."

"He's changed, Amy. You've stayed away so long you don't know. He's over there in the dark sitting with Esther and her house guest, Mr. Payne."

Amy was startled. Couldn't Allan have made some excuse to leave Esther Gregory by this time?

"Kate, do you know anyone who has a living-room 30 feet wide?"

"If anyone has, I wouldn't know it. I'm no good at guessing distances."

"Well, just a big living-room, then, with a hard floor, stone or tile, and a picture window?"

"Lots of people have big living-rooms with hard floors and picture windows."

"Are there many who have stables?"

"Probably. You remember there's fox hunting here in the fall."

"How many people have Negro butlers?"

"I don't know any, but several have Negro chauffeurs."

"Do many people keep Siamese cats?"

"The Pettys have one. What are you driving at, Amy?"

"Think, Kate. Do you know anybody at all who has all these things? A big living-room with a picture window and a bare, hard floor, stables, a Negro chauffeur, and a Siamese cat?"

"I can't think of anyone. Maybe Allan would know. A doctor visits so many houses."

"I thought of that, but . . ." Amy sighed. Had her voice sounded a little too upset over the telephone? A doctor who cares about his practice might not like to be mixed up in "something queer."

"Kate, do you know any man at all who has an unusually hoarse, rough voice?"

"No. What is all this about, Amy?"

"I'm sorry, Kate, but I don't want to tell you. I'm still hoping it was all a mistake of some kind. Somebody

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rehearsing a play or something like that. But there was something in their voices that made it seem — real. Two losts souls talking in Limbo. I suppose that's the way people do talk when they're in love and the love is furtive and criminal."

A man's voice interrupted: "Am I late?" It was Curtis Gregory standing in the hall doorway. "Amy, I didn't know you would be here today." His pleasant, usually grave face relaxed in a warm smile. "We never seem to see you in town. When you were twelve you didn't avoid me like that!"

Amy returned the smile with affection. "When I was twelve I wasn't running an art gallery in Manhattan!"

"You're not drinking?" said Curtis. "May I get you some sherry?"

Peter had come over to welcome Curtis. "For heaven's sake, Amy!" He spoke to his sister with a touch of patronage he had learned from their mother. "Sherry is such an affectation. Why can't you drink Martinis like everybody else?"

"I'll get you sherry." On his way to the cocktail table, Curtis paused in front of the settee: "Esther, where have you been all afternoon? I thought you were going to meet me at the club for a swim."

Amy didn't hear the reply. She turned to her brother: "Is that all you have to say to me, Peter?"

"State Department tact," put in Kate tartly.

"Oh, you know I'm glad to see you, Sis!" Peter's grin was a little ashamed. "And I'm not in the State Department yet, Kate. I haven't even decided."

Peter had flirted with many possible careers — bonds, publishing, real estate. But somehow when it came to the point there was always some good reason for not leaving the pleasant homes his mother maintained in New York and Oldport. Obviously, Kate was beginning to worry about Peter's emotional and economic dependence on his mother.

"You'll have to do something," she said wearily. "I'd rather have the simplest household of our own than go on living with your mother forever!"

Natalie could not have caught the words, but her quick ear picked up the tone and she acted swiftly to break up the trio: "Children, we really must go in to dinner!" She raised her voice slightly to include the whole company: "Allan, you'll stay, won't you? . . . Mr. Payne, Esther, please bring your glasses to the table. We can't be late for the dance."

Amy was scarcely conscious of Payne, the only stranger, as Esther stepped into the light from the lamp in the hall. She was a woman who drew and held the eye irresistibly. Under hair like polished onyx, her face had all the perfection of a marble image, Greek of the classical period. But there was something strange about her beauty, a disturbing touch of mystery that was emphasized by the slight, weary smile.

"Amy, dear, don't you remember me? I remember you at my wedding

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two years ago. You were such an attractive child, so artless and serious."

"I'm still rather artless." Amy couldn't trust herself to say more at that moment. Esther's voice was high, rapid, clear, and rather cool. Unmistakably the voice of the woman Amy had heard on the telephone this afternoon. The voice that grew a little breathless and faltered when it said: "*If anything should go . . . wrong I hope . . . adjoining cells before . . . the end.*" But who was the man?

In the dining-room four long windows stood open to the terrace. The night was so still that the candle flames were as motionless as the candles. Mahogany brought out the fine detail of doily lace and doubled the flames in its dark red mirror. Natalie had spoken of dinner, but it was actually a buffet supper. Guests gathered around the sideboard, plates in hand, serving themselves, while the maid confined herself to pouring coffee. When Amy turned back to the table she found a place next to the Gregorys' house guest, Payne.

Her first glimpse of him on the terrace had suggested a young man, tall, lean, muscular. The face he turned toward her now placed him somewhere between 30 and 40. Lines had begun to form about the eyes and mouth. The skin was swarthy and weather-beaten. A plain face, yet when he smiled it was transfigured by a flash of gaiety and daring. The smile of a born adventurer, as different from other smiles as the warm, dancing light of a wood fire is different from the steady, impersonal glow of an electric bulb. "*You're the toughest woman I know . . . Why I love . . .*" Yes, Amy could imagine Payne saying that. She felt her own smile waver as she realized that now she would hear his voice.

"You're Miss Corbett, aren't you? Nobody bothered to introduce us. I'm Matthew Payne."

Amy's breath escaped in a long sigh. This voice was deep and masculine, but it was mellow, almost soft, with a hint of Southwestern drawl.

And yet it had all fitted so neatly. A house guest of the Gregorys', a mature man who looked reckless, a stranger whose voice Amy had never heard before. Was it conceivable that he was the man, that he knew someone had overheard him and that he was deliberately disguising his voice? Could anyone but an actor do that?

"Haven't I seen you on the stage, Mr. Payne? Or in the movies?"

"Who, me?" His laugh was as uninhibited as his smile. "Do I look like that?"

"It's not your looks. It's your voice." She gazed at him directly. "I think I've heard it before."

"I doubt that." He frowned, apparently puzzled. "I've never been on stage or screen and I've been on the air only once. During the war when I was with the OSS." He was smiling again. "Could it be that one radio speech?"

"No." She managed to smile back at him. "What is your job now that OSS is disbanded?"

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"Insurance. That was my last job before the war, too."

"Your last job?"

"Before that I had all sorts of odd jobs — cowpunching in Texas, engineering in Mexico. Jack-of-all-trades and master of none."

"Matt, you should take yourself more seriously!" The cool voice startled Amy. She had not realized that Esther, across the table, was listening. "You sound like an adventurer. Are you playing Othello to Amy's Desdemona? She may look young and inexperienced, but she isn't naïve. Not at all." Esther's eyes dwelt on Amy for the moment enigmatically.

"So I've discovered!" Payne was amused.

"Matt has had a most interesting life," Esther went on to Amy. "He has lived the sort of thing most people today merely read about. Especially when he was in the OSS."

"I'm sorry if I seemed rude." Amy turned to Payne impulsively. "It was the voice, really. I was so sure that I'd heard it before."

"The voice?" Esther's eyes glittered in the candlelight. "Where did you think you had heard Matt's voice before, Amy?"

"I — didn't know." The tone of that question was disturbing.

After supper, in the hall, Allan said, "Will you drive with me to the dance, Amy? Then we can have that talk we planned on the way."

There were two cars on the sweep of gravel outside. Amy recognized Allan's little coupé. The big sedan must be the Gregorys'. Natalie was already arranging her skirts on the back seat of the big car, when Peter said:

"I don't like jump seats! Esther, will you drive with me if I get my convertible? I can't ask Kate or Mother, because they don't like to get their hair blown."

It was said lightly, easily, but Amy was conscious of effort under the ease, heaviness in the moment that followed the lightness.

Esther smiled. "I'd love to, Peter. Night is so much more lovely than day. It's the one time I really enjoy an open car."

Without a word, Kate got into the big car beside Natalie.

"That leaves you to sit with the ladies, Matt, while I drive." Curtis Gregory spoke as if he were unaware of tension, and the big car moved away.

"Why is night more lovely than day?" inquired Allan.

"Can you ask?" Esther threw back her head to look up at the stars. Her mantilla fell softly away from her face, a part of the shadows like the filmy black of her dress. "Day is commonplace. Night has mystery. And awe."

Peter's convertible swung around the corner from the garage and came to a stop. Light from the house fell on the sleeve of his old topcoat as he reached out an arm to open the door of the car.

"Just a minute, Peter." Amy was

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glad of the chance to shatter Esther's romantic mood. "Something on your sleeve." She was all sister, as she plucked at a tuft of tawny hair.

"Golden tress of a beautiful blonde?" suggested Allan.

"No." Amy's voice was colorless. "It looks more like the hairs of a cat. A Siamese cat."

Allan's car left the tree-lined lanes of Oldport for the State Highway that ran through farm and wasteland to the Yacht Club. The starlit road unwound before them swiftly as a white ribbon unreeling from a runaway spool. Allan's dark, good-looking face was in shadow, but Amy saw the gleam of his teeth as he grinned. "You sounded very upset on the telephone," he said. "What gives?"

Amy was silent. Then: "Allan, tell me something? What do you think of Esther Gregory?"

"She's the most amazing woman I've ever seen. The word 'beautiful' is too shopworn for her. Every screen star and advertising model is called beautiful today. Usually a matter of clever camera angles and trick make-up. Esther's beauty isn't a trick. It's Esther. It's the way she steps and smiles and breathes and speaks. It's the faint shadow in the hollows at her temples and the way her hair grows on the nape of her neck."

Amy sighed. "Tell me something else. Do you like her?"

"Of course. Don't you?"

"I think she's fascinating, but I'm not sure I like her."

"You've only met her once or twice before this evening, haven't you?"

"Once. At her wedding."

"You'll like her when you get to know her better. Has Esther got anything to do with this thing you want my advice about?"

They were passing a farm that stood in a clearing. The farmhouse was bright with lamplight, snug, warm, and safe. Why "safe"? Amy asked herself. Didn't she feel safe on this familiar road with one of her oldest friends?

"Yes, Allan. She has, and it's not a — a nice thing. Perhaps I'd better not tell you, if you're such a good friend of Esther's."

"We're not exactly friends." Allan's voice was calm, reassuring. "Not the way you and I are. Go ahead."

He listened stolidly as she repeated the telephone conversation, slowing the pace of the car so they would have more time. "You're sure you couldn't identify the man's voice?"

Amy could not see Allan's face. His voice was expressionless. "No, I couldn't. But I'm sure of the woman. Perhaps the telephone distorted the man's voice. Anyway, we know he's a man of cultivated tastes."

"Do we? Everybody's heard of Paolo and Francesca."

"But not everybody has heard of Andrew Marvell." Amy quoted pensively:

"*The grave's a fine and private place*
But none, I think, do there embrace . . ."

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"You said it was the woman who quoted that," objected Allan.

"But she wouldn't have quoted it if he hadn't been the sort of man who would recognize it," insisted Amy. "Allan, should I go to the police?"

He sighed. "Would that be wise? Your only evidence is subjective: your own identification of a woman's voice heard briefly on an open telephone line. There are no other witnesses and you admit the telephone distorts a voice. You may be mistaken about the voice; you may have misunderstood some of the words as well. These people may not have used the word 'murder' at all. Even if you did hear and remember every word correctly, there may have been nothing more sinister at the other end of that telephone than a radio playing a snatch of dialogue from some crime play. Even if you don't care for Esther herself, think how Curtis will feel if you go to the police!"

"But, Allan, that's the whole point! If this murderous woman is Esther Gregory, there can be only one victim — Curtis himself!"

"Curtis? Wait a minute. Let's stop and get this straight." Allan swung his car onto the grass beside the road and then turned in his seat to look at her. "Did either of them mention Curtis by name?"

"No." A throb in Amy's voice betrayed her anxiety. "But, Allan! They were lovers, quite obviously. '*You're the toughest woman I know . . . Why I love . . .*' And they were illicit lovers. '*Paolo and Francesca . . . didn't seem like adultery when it was you and I.*' Who is always the victim of a wife who talks murder with a lover? The husband, of course!"

"Ever hear of divorce?"

"Curtis has money, hasn't he? He used to run some sort of importing business before he was in the Army. Silk, I think. If Esther has no money of her own and if the lover himself is poor . . ."

Allan looked down at his own hands, clasping the rim of the steering wheel. "I didn't realize at first how serious you were about this. Now, there's something I shall have to tell you. I recognized that room the moment you described it — the hard, bare floor, the width — 30 feet, the picture window overlooking a terrace, even the Siamese cat and the stables."

"And the Negro?"

"He happens to be a white man from Alabama. Hearing him without seeing the color of his skin, anyone would take him for a Negro." Allan smiled crookedly. "You didn't know that I'd had my place done over this spring, did you? That room happens to be my own waiting-room."

"Allan . . ." The word died in her throat for lack of breath.

"And now . . ." There was a new, hard note in his voice as he leaned forward to turn the ignition key. "We're not going to the Yacht Club. We're going to my place to find out just who was there late this afternoon."

The car left the highway and turned down a lamplit, almost suburban road.

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"Allan, it's such a coincidence."

"What is?"

"That I got your number when I got a wrong number."

Allan laughed. "Don't you see what must have happened? You planned to call me after you called your mother at the Gregorys'. My number was in the foreground of your mind, so, in a moment of abstraction, you gave my number instead of the Gregorys'. Perhaps you really wanted to call me more than you wanted to call your mother."

"Don't go Freudian on me!" protested Amy.

"If the woman you overheard really was Esther Gregory and if it was the operator who gave you a wrong number, the whole thing would be a mathematical impossibility. Out of all the numbers in Oldport, the operator selects one for you by pure chance that tunes you in on a room where a woman you already know is talking. I couldn't believe that. But if the wrong number wasn't chosen by chance, if you actually chose it unconsciously, it's not surprising you overheard someone you knew."

"Was Esther at your place today?"

"Not to my knowledge, but we'll find out."

Amy remembered Allan's home as a long, low, white-painted house, standing in an open meadow that gave the place its name, The Paddock. Now, by the car's headlight, she could see that the meadow had become a cultivated lawn enclosed in a neat hedge, and a new wing had been added to the house itself. A light shone from one of several outbuildings.

"Stables?" murmured Amy as the car halted.

"I keep a cow and a saddle horse. Curtis sold me the idea I should have a horse for exercise. Sold me the horse, too, for that matter. I ride on the beach mornings before I go to the hospital."

"What sort of staff do you have here?"

"One of the local nurses comes during office hours to keep records straight and help with patients. Then I have a housekeeper, Mrs. Adams. Nice old soul. It's she who's responsible for the Siamese cat. Got him a week ago."

"And the man from Alabama who talks like a Negro?"

"Sharpe. He comes in twice a day to look after the grounds and the stables. He's a gardener, really, employed by a landscaping company to mow lawns and trim hedges on the big places around here. But he likes to make extra money, so he comes to me when he's off duty."

"And that's the terrace and the picture window." Amy was looking at the new wing.

Allan opened the front door without a key.

"Don't you ever lock it?"

"In Oldport? Of course not!"

Allan led the way through a door on the left and pressed a light switch. The waiting-room was big, at least 30 feet wide, obviously new, aseptically impersonal. There were no

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rugs. The floor was some synthetic composite, a mottled gray that looked like marble and rang like stone under Amy's heels.

"Allan! This must be the place." Her glance came to rest on a desk with a telephone.

"That's where the nurse sits. There are two other extensions, in my office and in my bedroom."

"Wouldn't the nurse be here at 5 o'clock? That's the time I telephoned."

"She leaves a few minutes earlier if there are no patients in the waiting-room and I am out on house visits, as I was today."

"Then it's no use asking your housekeeper whether Esther was here today or not. This room could have been empty when the telephone rang about 5 o'clock. The stableman, Sharpe, might have heard it, passing a window. He might have stepped inside to answer it, knowing you and the nurse had gone, not knowing whether the housekeeper heard it or not. Only, when I asked for Mrs. Corbett, why did he say she might be down at the stables?"

"Because she might." Allan's voice was sober, plainly worried. He looked heavier, more settled and weary than Amy remembered him. "Your mother and Peter have been here a lot this summer."

"So Sharpe puts the telephone down on the desk, leaving the line connected, and walks out to the stables," mused Amy. "That walk would take several minutes. While he's gone, two other people come into the waiting-room — a man and a woman. They walk in unannounced because the front door is unlocked. If they are discovered they can always claim they came as patients."

"But why come here at all?" demanded Allan.

Amy smiled. "Remember what the woman said: '*Where's the Nembutal?*'"

"Holy Moses! I'll check that at once." Allan hurried through the door to his office. Amy followed, and found him standing before a cupboard on the wall.

"Do you always leave the key in the lock like that?"

"No. I carry one key and keep a spare in the desk drawer."

"Where any patient might have seen it?"

He nodded. "That's the spare." He took a bottle of capsules out of the cupboard. The face he turned to Amy now was haggard. "There seem to be about a dozen capsules missing. I swear I can't remember whether I took them out myself to put in my bag or not."

"Now, do you believe my story?"

"I suppose I must." He locked the cupboard. "Even so, I'm not sure you have enough evidence to go to the police. I can report the missing Nembutal, but that conversation you overheard is still a flimsy basis for accusing a woman like Esther Gregory. And you have no idea who the man was."

"Perhaps we can find out now." Amy's eyes shone. "Allan, haven't you wondered about afterward?"

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"After what?"

"After that telephone connection was cut. The man, Sharpe, must have come back from the stables to tell me that Mrs. Corbett wasn't there. Did he find Esther and the man still here or see them leave the house?"

Allan frowned. "Are you sure it was your sudden start that cut the telephone conversation? Isn't it possible that the people you overheard discovered the open telephone line at that moment? In that case, one of them would cut the connection and they'd both get away as fast as they could, before anyone saw them. They couldn't know that the listener at the other end of the line thought she had a wrong number. They would think she knew she was listening to a conversation in my house. So they couldn't afford to be seen here at that particular time."

"Even then they may not have got away fast enough. Sharpe may have seen them." Amy turned toward the door. "Is he down at the stable now? There was a light there when we came in."

After the aseptic, fluorescent glitter of office and waiting-room, it was hard to see, outside. Amy stumbled as they crossed the uneven turf.

Allan opened the stable door. "Sharpe?"

There was a thud of iron-shod hoofs on wood. Allan opened a door on the right and pressed a wall switch. The light of a naked bulb showed a concrete floor and a box stall of unfinished wood. A horse's head lifted across the barrier — dark chestnut with a black mane. Amy saw the white rim that circled rolling eyeballs.

"Quiet there, old girl. What's the matter?" Surprise edged Allan's voice. "Usually Stormbird . . . Great heavens!"

Allan was looking intently into the mare's box. She moved, and her shadow shifted with her, so that light fell on the farther wall. Now Amy could see the crumpled body of a man in overalls and the horseshoe curve of the wound that had crushed his skull, dark with blood against a bloodless face.

"Sharpe!" Allan whispered incredulously. "But Stormbird wouldn't . . . I've been in that stall with her often."

Amy turned away, fighting nausea. "It wasn't Stormbird." She closed her eyes, leaning her head against the wall. "Now we know what happened . . . afterward. And we can't prove a thing."

Never again would Amy enjoy the pungent smell of horse and hay and leather. She opened her eyes and walked numbly into the yard outside.

"Allan!"

"Yes?" He was at her elbow.

"I have to tell the police about that conversation now."

"You're not suggesting that Esther killed Sharpe?"

"Of course not. But the man who was with her did. Sharpe was the only person who knew that a Miss Corbett had called your number and been left listening to an open line that led to

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your waiting-room. Sharpe was the only person who could have seen the couple who came into that room while the line was still open without noticing it. Don't you see? They were still there when he got back and he told them who had called. They realized instantly that, once I talked to Sharpe, he would identify them for me. And I was certain to talk to Sharpe as soon as I identified your waiting-room as the place where they had talked. Together, Sharpe and I were a menace. I could testify to the couple's conversation. Sharpe could identify the couple. So the man killed Sharpe to save Esther and himself."

"Would any man murder to escape a charge of attempted murder? That is the only accusation you and Sharpe could make!"

"Suppose they want to carry out their original plan of murdering Curtis and making it look like an accident? There must be some overwhelming motive for that—or they would never have planned it in the first place! If I charge Esther now, or later, and she denies the whole thing, it's just my word against hers. Without Sharpe's corroboration, I have nothing but my belief that I identified the woman's voice as Esther's. Allan, what should I do?"

"Tell your story without identifying Esther. Then you have told the police everything that you actually know. You can't name Esther when you're not sure it was she."

"Esther — always Esther! Are you so fond of her?"

"Don't you understand? If you accuse Esther without proof they can't arrest her. But they'll have to question her. If she's guilty she'll know from their questions that you identified her voice and not the man's. She will tell the man and —"

"And I'll be in danger, too?" Amy broke off short. "Lights! See? A car coming into the drive."

"Quick!" Allan started to run toward the house. "Keep them in the living-room, whoever they are, while I call the police from my office."

The car had halted. A slender figure in drifting black stepped into the light. Fine brows arched. Dark eyes turned in Amy's direction. Esther was smiling. "Amy! Your mother was getting worried, so we came to look for you. I thought we might find you here."

Another figure stepped out of the shadows. "I was ordered to look for you. Esther came along for the ride. Where's Allan?"

Amy looked from the mockery in Esther's eyes to the blandly impudent face of her brother. She took a certain satisfaction in her calm rejoinder: "Allan? Oh, he's gone to call the police."

"Police?" Peter's eyes widened, but Esther's narrowed. A clear indication of temperament, thought Amy — the one, impetuous; the other, calculating. Or could it be that Peter was surprised and that Esther was not?

"A man has been killed. Allan's stableman. Allan wants us to wait for the police in the living-room."

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"But it has nothing to do with us!" cried Peter.

"It has to do with me," retorted Amy. "I was with Allan when he found the body."

The living-room was cheerful and commonplace — gray chintzes splashed with cherry-red against gray walls and carpet. The only exotic note was the cat that sprang forward to welcome them, biscuit-colored with the seal-brown face and paws of a Siamese.

"Oh, Houri!" Esther put out her hand. But Houri spat at the hand and fled to the top of a bookcase.

Allan walked into the room. "They'll be here in a few minutes."

"Can't they see Amy tomorrow?" demanded Peter.

"There's something only I can tell them." Amy turned to Allan. "You'll let them know that my story is vital evidence, won't you?"

Allan nodded. "Of course. I'm going outside to wait for them."

"Vital evidence?" Peter looked at Amy with irritation. "You're dramatizing yourself. What vital evidence?"

"I'd rather not tell anyone but the police."

Peter lit one cigarette after another. Amy, herself, was restless. Only Esther was outwardly serene.

Allan came in again and shut the door behind him. "The man in charge is Murchison. Assistant District Attorney. Rather like a German police dog. If he were defending your rights, you'd think he was a faithful, well-trained animal. But if you were the man whom he was defending someone's rights against, you'd certainly think he was a vicious brute that ought to be shot."

"And which are you?" Esther's voice was cool.

Allan shrugged. "He hasn't decided — yet. The body was found on my premises, but it looks like an accident and I can account for most of my time. I was making house visits between 5 and 7, when Sharpe must have died, but of course there are some time-gaps between each visit."

"Isn't that less suspicious than a watertight alibi?" suggested Peter.

"Perhaps. Especially as I had no motive for killing poor Lem Sharpe."

"Lem Sharpe!" Peter was startled. "The man who cuts our lawn?" He turned to Amy: "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know that you knew the man at all," returned Amy.

"Everybody knows Sharpe," exclaimed Esther. "He's employed by Neilson and Eddington, the landscape gardeners. They take care of all the lawns and hedges around here on a weekly basis."

Peter was smiling for the first time since he had entered the room. "The D.A. was just looking for excitement," he said comfortably. "No one would kill an inoffensive chap like Sharpe."

Amy spoke quietly: "I think he was murdered."

"Why?" Peter's smile vanished.

The door opened. The man who came into the room did have the long-legged lope of a police dog. The eyes,

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too — a light hazel that looked shallow and flat, with a small, hard core of black pupil. "Miss Corbett? Dr. Galt says there is something you want to tell me. Let's have it."

Amy looked at him in astonishment. Witnesses with vital information were always interviewed alone so others could not adjust their testimony to suit. "Mr. Murchison, I would rather talk to you privately."

She saw a trace of amusement under the hard surface of his eyes. She had been wrong to trust Allan as go-between. Unintentionally or not, he had given Murchison an idea that her evidence was not vital at all.

Esther's high, cool voice cut the silence: "Miss Corbett is young and inexperienced, Mr. Murchison. The shock of discovering this body has brought her to the edge of hysteria. Don't you agree that at least one of us, I or her brother, should be present while you question her?"

"Well, Miss Corbett?" Murchison was indifferent.

Amy felt the color hot in her cheeks. Esther's gentle patronage spurred her to recklessness. "All right. What I have to say concerns Mrs. Gregory."

Once or twice Amy, herself, had doubted her identification of Esther as the woman whose voice she had overheard. Now all doubt died. In the first instant of shock a look flashed across Esther's face that startled even Amy. A sudden, taut thinning of the lips, a sudden, wide blazing of the eyes, and that beautiful face became a tortured mask, a specter from the nightmare side of the human soul, glancing to the surface for the moment, then, as swiftly, submerged.

The men did not see it. They were all looking at Amy, herself.

Esther's voice was as calmly modulated as ever: "I have no idea what you are talking about, Amy."

"Sis!" Peter's voice was harsh. "If you're dramatizing yourself again —!"

"Trust a brother to give you a good send-off!" Amy turned to Allan: "Tell Mr. Murchison: Do I dramatize myself? And do I stick to facts?"

Allan looked at Peter, then at Amy, with embarrassment. "You try to be truthful. You are imaginative, but — you never distort facts knowingly."

Amy had expected more from Allan. She began to feel as if she were struggling in an invisible net, fine, clinging, steely as a spider's web. She told her tale badly, her very voice faltering, a witness against her.

Murchison was skeptical. "You understand that this is a very serious thing, if it is true? In effect, you are accusing Mrs. Gregory of plotting with a lover to kill her husband. But you have no evidence and no other witness to corroborate your statement."

"There was a witness — Sharpe. Now he is dead. It can't be coincidence!"

Peter broke in angrily: "See here, Murchison. My sister has always been erratic. Ask my mother if you don't

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believe me! Amy is what they used to call a tomboy, and she has always neglected our mother, who is a very feminine person, herself. Today Amy comes down here and finds Esther Gregory taking her place with Mother, more like a daughter than Amy, herself, ever was. It's easy to see how her sense of guilt would sharpen her jealousy of Esther. So when she overhears this conversation, probably a radio play, she imagines that she recognizes the woman's voice as Esther's."

All this time Esther had had the wisdom to sit perfectly still, with only a slight expression of dismay. Subtly she was suggesting that Amy's accusations were too wild to merit her denial.

"There's another point worth considering," said Allan. "There has never been the slightest breath of scandal about Mrs. Gregory. She and her husband are the most devoted couple I know."

"Of course." Peter was simmering. "Everybody knows that."

Murchison pursed his lips and looked thoughtfully at Allan. "There's one point you haven't mentioned: the Nembutal. Some capsules may be missing, according to your statement. Perhaps your housekeeper saw some of the patients who called here between 5 and 7 this afternoon after you and the nurse had left."

"She saw me," said Peter defiantly. "I wasn't going to mention it, because it didn't seem to be relevant, but now I'll have to. I came here this afternoon around 6 o'clock to get some empirin for my mother's neuralgia. The housekeeper let me in, but there didn't seem to be anyone else around except the cat. That's how I got that bit of cat fur on my sleeve, Amy — playing with Houri."

"And you just helped yourself to Nembutal?" suggested Murchison.

"Of course not! Why should I do an idiotic thing like that?"

Allan intervened: "You do understand that I'm not sure whether any Nembutal is missing or not?"

Murchison turned to Amy with a smile that was not unfriendly. "There goes the one bit of corroboration you had. Better forget the whole thing and get a good night's rest." He became gravely polite as he addressed Esther: "Are you and your husband patients of Dr. Galt?"

"My husband has been his patient. I haven't been ill since I came here."

"And I suppose you can account for most of your time this afternoon between 5 and 7?"

"Of course." Esther smiled through her distress, sunshine piercing a storm cloud. "I was at home all afternoon until I went to the Corbetts' for dinner. My husband was out, but our house guest, Mr. Payne, can probably assure you I didn't leave the house. He was in his own room writing letters. The window beside the desk in that room overlooks the front drive. I am sure he would have seen me if I had gone out."

"And the servants?"

"They were in the kitchen. Two

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maids, Bridget and Anna. So I couldn't have gone out the back way, either. And there are no French windows." Esther's smile seemed to say, "Is all this necessary?"

Murchison's answering smile agreed that it was not. "Thank you, Mrs. Gregory. That clears up everything, I think."

Amy felt physically ill. "Aren't you going to — do anything?"

Murchison looked at her, no longer friendly. "What do you expect me to do? The District Attorney's office has to decline prosecution if there isn't enough evidence to win a case in court. In this case there's no evidence at all. I really think you owe Mrs. Gregory an apology. Good night."

Through a haze across her eyes and a drumming in her ears, Amy heard Allan and Peter saying "Good night" to Murchison in voices loud with relief as they escorted him to the front door.

Amy looked at Esther. "Well?" Amy's voice was hard.

But Esther answered softly, "Well?"

"It's between you and me, isn't it?"

If Amy hoped that the sting of her words would bring that revealing look of frenzy to Esther's face again, she was mistaken. Esther's smile was so gentle, so tired, that Amy began to wonder. Had she been deceived by a trick of the lamplight? Had she really surprised that look on Esther's face at all?

"My dear child" — there was a slight vibrancy in Esther's voice — "I am distressed to think you could believe me capable of such things."

Amy looked at her steadily. "It's witchcraft. Both Peter and Allan defended you, though it meant discrediting me. You could charm a dead man out of his shroud. You almost charmed me. Almost. Not quite. If only I knew who he was, the man you talked to this afternoon, the man who killed Sharpe. Peter can be a fool. Allan admires you. And Payne was at your home with you this afternoon while poor Curtis was out. Why couldn't you and Payne have left the house together and come over here? Your maids were in the kitchen. They might not have seen you leave."

Esther dropped her eyelids. Her face was still. "Can you really believe that I don't love Curtis?"

"I'm sorry. You sound as if you meant it, but I heard you talking to the other man. If anything happens to Curtis now, I — I'll spend the rest of my life bringing it home to you. I'm warning you."

Amy could not understand Esther's sudden smile. Honest anger or hypocritical scorn would have been normal responses. But why that look of sly, almost mischievous irony? As if Amy had done or said something utterly stupid that played directly into Esther's hands. . . .

Amy woke late the next morning. In a wan voice, she answered the tap on her door: "Come in!" A maid entered with a breakfast tray. Natalie followed, trailing an exquisitely fragile lavender peignoir. She lit a cigarette and waited until the maid had gone.

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"Amy, you know I love you, but why did you have to cause Peter such embarrassment last night? He tells me you practically accused his friend, Esther Gregory, of murder without any evidence at all."

"His friend?" Amy put down her coffee cup. "I thought Esther was your friend. And there was evidence. Let me tell you."

As Natalie listened, a shrewdness came into her eyes Amy had never remarked before. "I suppose the man was Payne."

Amy was amazed. "You believe me? You think Esther capable of such a thing?"

Natalie smiled. "My dear child, I've always suspected that Esther was capable of anything. That's one reason she fascinated me."

"But I thought she was your friend!"

"A woman my age doesn't make friends, Amy. I don't like Esther. I like being with her. She's decorative and if I'm giving a party I know the men will have a good time if Esther's there. But I've always thought she would be a dangerous woman if she were thwarted."

"Then you don't think I did wrong last night?"

"On the contrary, I think you did very wrong. Not because I care about Esther, but because I care about you. What business is it of yours if Esther has a lover?"

"No business of mine at all," agreed Amy. "But murder is everybody's business."

"Murder?" It was Natalie's turn to be amazed. "Esther is not a fool!"

"But I heard her say —"

"Oh, talk!" Natalie brushed the idea aside. "People who talk about murder don't commit one. Just as people who talk about suicide never kill themselves. You happened to catch Esther and her lover at a morbid moment, daydreaming about something they would never have the nerve — or the stupidity — to carry out in cold blood. I'm not afraid of Esther's murdering Curtis. I am afraid of his divorcing her and washing a great deal of dirty linen in public."

Amy sighed. As usual she and her mother had been talking at cross-purposes. When Natalie said, "I've always suspected that Esther was capable of anything," she meant anything scandalous, not anything criminal. Violence was something outside all Natalie's traditions and experience.

"I don't care what happens to Esther," Natalie was saying. "But I don't want my daughter mixed up in a nasty thing like this. Or my son."

So that was it.

"But — Peter isn't involved!" protested Amy.

"Are you sure?" Natalie frowned. "Esther is at the age when women make fools of themselves over younger men."

"Then it was more hope than faith that made you say, 'I suppose the man was Payne'?"

"He's a likely candidate, but — Peter never did have the brains you have. The only thing now is to pick

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up the pieces." Natalie cast an appraising look at Amy, the look of any mother whose daughter is "unpredictable." "Curtis Gregory is downstairs now. He wants to see you. That's why I woke you. I have an impression that he's as anxious to protect Esther as I am to protect Peter, and Curtis thinks you can help. I hope you'll do whatever he suggests."

Amy pushed aside her unfinished breakfast and began to dress. Natalie would never understand a woman like Esther. Natalie knew nothing of the height of passion or the depth of despair. She enjoyed playing the game according to the rules, but Esther was potentially lawless. . . .

Curtis waited at the foot of the stairs. The face he lifted to Amy was drawn and sallow in the morning light. "Let's go outdoors," he suggested. "Where we can talk undisturbed."

Amy led the way around the front of the house to a carefully cultivated patch of lawn, an oasis amidst the wind-blown poverty-grass of the dunes. There were iron chairs that Natalie had had painted dusty pink instead of the usual white. Curtis leaned forward in his chair, hands tense, eyes haunted, the eyes of a stranger.

"Amy, I want you to think carefully before you answer the question I'm going to ask you. Could you go on the witness stand and swear that the woman's voice you overheard on the telephone was Esther's?"

Amy shook her head. "I couldn't swear. But I believe it. Don't you?"

Curtis sat back in his chair, his face relaxed in the smile that was so familiar. "Of course not." The glance he bent on Amy now was the old, quizzically affectionate glance she knew so well. "I'm not quite a fool, Amy," he said comfortably. "And I'm a good many years older than you. If Esther cared about another man, I should know it. Do you believe me?"

There was unmistakable sincerity in his voice. Amy looked into the friendly eyes and felt a great compassion for him. If Esther was abusing such unquestioning faith, she was doing something more coldly evil than murder itself.

"You understand that I wasn't just — gossiping?" said Amy. "I would not have said anything if there had been no talk of murder."

"I understand that." Curtis's voice was quickly sympathetic. "You thought you were protecting me and you couldn't warn me without accusing Esther. I just wish you hadn't done it so publicly. There's going to be talk now. Unpleasant talk. But we can fight that, if you'll help. Will you?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"First of all, Esther wants to talk to you. Will you go to see her today?"

"What good will that do?"

"Amy —" There was surprise in his voice. "Don't you like my wife?"

"I must answer honestly: We're not congenial."

"That's too bad." Curtis frowned.

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"Because she likes you so much. She feels that if she could just have a talk with you she could clear up any misunderstanding. Will you try, Amy?"

Amy was surprised at the almost physical revulsion she felt. "All right, I'll try. To please you. Anything else?"

"Yes. Your mother thinks we should all appear in public together as soon as possible, behave just as if nothing had happened. It's a matter of saving face."

"That sounds like Mother," murmured Amy.

"Your mother knows her world," returned Curtis. "She has the nerve and the presence and influence to carry off a thing like this. The rest of us will have to play up to her."

"Mother has no influence with the police."

"She has social influence, which is more important now," explained Curtis. "The police may be satisfied, but what about public opinion? If your mother appears in public with you and Esther, everyone will know that she never believed your charges against Esther and that you have withdrawn them."

"Then it's really Esther whose face we are to save?"

For a moment Curtis was silent. Then he spoke earnestly: "You don't seem to realize, Amy, how much I love my wife. If your fantastic idea were true, if she actually did love another man, I would do everything to make divorce easy for her, once I was convinced she really wanted it. That's why this idea of her planning my death is so ridiculous. She has no conceivable motive for wishing me out of the way." His voice shook.

Amy wondered at his emotion. Under this brave front was he, too, beginning to doubt Esther? Moved, she said quickly, "When is this to be?"

"Tomorrow. We'll dine at the club and stay for the dance afterward. We can meet at my place for cocktails—you and your mother, Kate and Peter and Allan, Esther and Payne and myself."

"The same party we had last night." Amy spoke with a sense of foreboding.

"It has to be," insisted Curtis. "And you will go to see Esther today? Around teatime?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Amy."

She watched his tall figure move toward the car he had left in the drive. He turned to smile at her. "Don't worry, Amy!"

She went into the house. In the living-room, Natalie was pretending to read the morning *Times*. Amy knew it was pretense, for the paper was open at the financial page, and Natalie never read anything but book reviews and fashions. Peter wasn't pretending anything. He openly waited for Amy.

"Well?" he said as Amy came in.

She spoke a little tartly: "Curtis doesn't believe Esther is capable of violence. If she's been indiscreet, he would much rather not know anything about it, so I made him happy

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by admitting I couldn't swear the woman whose voice I heard was Esther. I'm to see her this afternoon and we're all dining together publicly tomorrow."

"Well, I'm glad it's all settled!" Natalie spoke as if a minor domestic problem had been happily resolved. Her heels tapped briskly, almost gaily, as she trotted upstairs.

Amy crossed the room to Peter. "Tell me something, Pete." It was a long time since she had used his schoolboy nickname. "You weren't ever really serious about Esther, were you?"

"What ever gave you that idea?"

"Something Kate said last night."

"Oh, Kate!" He laughed uneasily. "She's become quite possessive lately."

"Did Esther ever encourage you?"

"Well—" Peter had the grace to color. "But it wasn't serious."

"Then perhaps you were only a smoke screen," suggested Amy with sisterly realism.

"Smoke screen for what?" There was a touch of pique in Peter's demand.

"For some other man, of course, who *was* serious about Esther. Kate's jealousy would make you an effective screen."

Peter looked at his sister with malice. "The only other man Esther sees much of is your pal, Allan Galt."

"What about Matthew Payne?"

"Could be," admitted Peter. "But I can't think of anyone else. Why are you so dead set against Esther?"

"Look what she's done to Curtis. He used to have character, but now — I wouldn't like her to do the same thing to you, Pete."

"She won't. Don't worry."

"That's what Curtis said," Amy sighed. "But somebody's got to worry."

"Why?"

"Because I'm morally certain that it was Esther's voice I heard on the telephone. And I have no idea what her next move will be." . . .

By teatime long feelers of sea mist were creeping into every highway and byway like an invading army of ghosts. Even the Gregory house and stable, two solid blocks of ivy-covered brick, seemed to float and shiver like something seen under water. But Esther herself, standing before a blazing driftwood fire in the long, oak-paneled living-room, had laid aside her air of mystery as if it were a cast-off garment. In a dark crimson sweater and a skirt of black-and-white tweed, she was the proper young matron — wholesome, competent, discreet, with just a dash of sophisticated charm used as sparingly as bitters in a cocktail or garlic in a salad. Amy felt shabby in her old trench coat, glad she had worn her good tweeds underneath.

"Tea?" said Esther brightly. "Or something stronger?"

"Tea, please." Esther rang, and a maid brought in a tea tray, heels loud on the marble floor, bare for summer. An old-fashioned silver kettle swung from brackets above a flattened col-

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umn of blue flame. The ample teapot was gay with the dark blue and red, white, and gold of old Worcester. But Esther was not pleased. "No toast?"

"Sure, an' there's mice in the breadbox again, ma'am." The maid's answer came in a West Irish brogue pungent as peat smoke. "If only you had let me keep the sweet little kitten that wandered in here yesterday."

"That will do, Bridget. You know I don't like cats." Esther turned to Amy: "My first husband bred Persians and I had a surfeit of them then. . . . Cream?"

"No, thank you. Just lemon."

When Bridget had gone Amy said, "Esther, there's one thing I must make clear to you: I really did overhear that conversation, every word about as I repeated it. But, as Curtis pointed out this morning, I cannot swear the woman's voice was yours. So it's only fair for me to give you the benefit of the doubt." She paused to underline her next words: "As long as nothing else happens."

Esther frowned. "What else could happen?"

"All sorts of things." Amy looked at the fire. "Curtis really loves you, Esther. It would be horrible if he were disillusioned. Or if he were to — die."

The frown had gone. Esther dropped her lids. Eyeless, her face was a mask chiseled from stone — pale and hard.

"I've made her angry. She doesn't trust herself to speak," Amy thought.

On a stand near the hall door a telephone pealed stridently. "Excuse me." Esther walked down the room rapidly as if she were glad of the pretext to get away. "Hello?" She added, "It's all right, Bridget," to the maid who appeared in the doorway. Then, to the telephone: "I'll call you back in a few minutes. Good-bye."

From the hall door Esther looked back at Amy with guarded eyes. "I must get some information for the Horse Show Committee, but do wait. I'll be back in a moment."

Amy lit a cigarette. "If she hasn't come back by the time I've finished this, I'll go."

"Miss Corbett!"

She started, and dropped her cigarette. Matthew Payne was standing in the music-room doorway. He offered her another cigarette from his own case.

"No, thank you."

He lit one for himself. "You don't like me, do you?"

"No."

"That's better than indifference."

Amy began to draw on her gloves.

"Don't go. Why do you dislike me so much?"

"You were in the next room listening deliberately just now. You're the kind who does listen."

"So do you — on telephones. And you don't speak the truth."

Anger flashed through Amy. "What do you mean?"

"You disliked me before you knew that I had been listening to your little talk with Esther just now. Why not admit the truth? You think I was the man you overheard on an open telephone line talking to Esther."

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"Weren't you?" Amy looked at him directly and found his intent gaze disturbing.

But he was not disturbed. "Does my voice sound like it?" His tone was casual, almost impudent.

"Of course not. If it did I should have accused you last night. But that's the only reason for thinking you're not the man — your voice. If I could find some explanation for that, everything else would fit you. The only other men who have been with Esther frequently this summer are Allan and my brother Peter. I don't believe my brother capable of violence. I've known Allan all my life. He hasn't a romantic temperament like the man I overheard. Besides, I don't think voices I've known so long could be distorted enough to fool me. That leaves you, a stranger. The telephone may have an especially distorting effect on your voice. I don't know anything about your temperament, but you look like a romantic daredevil, quite capable of violence. You came here as Esther's friend, somebody out of her past. You may have been her lover for years, before she married Curtis."

"Then why did she marry Curtis?"

"Perhaps he could offer her some things you couldn't." Amy's glance took in the dark luxury of the oak-paneled room, at its handsomest by firelight. "Now she's got all this, she wants to keep it and have you, too. The only way is to get rid of Curtis. Even if he loves her enough to make divorce easy for her, he couldn't give her every penny he has, so he would have to be eliminated some other way."

"If you really believed all that you would be a fool to tell me so. I might get ideas about eliminating you. Look." He went on hurriedly. "You've got the whole thing dead wrong. I wasn't a friend of Esther's. I was a friend of Charley Maitland, her first husband."

"Isn't that the same thing? You knew them both, I suppose."

"Yes. But I liked Charley. I don't like Esther. I've always suspected she killed him for his insurance."

The silence seemed to sing in Amy's ears. "You said your job was selling insurance," Amy said finally.

"No, I said my job was insurance, not selling. Actually, I'm an insurance investigator. I investigated Charley Maitland's death before the company paid his policy to his widow."

"If they paid there can't have been any evidence of murder!"

"No real evidence — just my hunch, and one discrepancy in Esther's story. He was a cripple. He was killed by a fall downstairs when the brake of his wheel chair failed to work. Esther said he and she were alone in the house all that evening. But I happened to telephone about half an hour before the time Charley died and a stranger's voice answered the telephone, a man's voice that wasn't Charley's. That man was never traced. Esther denied, of course, that a man had been there. Since I came here I've been trying to de-

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cide whether he was Allan or Peter. Weren't they both on the West Coast during the war?"

Amy nodded, speechless.

"Wasn't Allan a poor man just out of medical school when he went into the Army? Isn't Peter entirely dependent on his mother?"

Again Amy nodded.

"So, either one might have been a lover who could not offer Esther all the things that Curtis Gregory has given her." Payne smiled wryly. "That shocks you, doesn't it? You thought you had fitted us all so neatly into our little slots! Allan and Peter must be innocent — men you've always known and liked. But a stranger — he might do anything."

"Not Peter!"

"That leaves Allan. Funny, I thought you liked him."

"I do."

"But your first cry was, 'Not Peter.' When a girl likes a man less than her brother —"

"Allan. I don't believe it! If you dislike Esther why did you come here at all?"

"Because another insurance man told me that Curtis has just applied for $50,000 worth of life insurance, with Esther as beneficiary. Some criminals are psychopathic enough to repeat the pattern of a crime once it has succeeded. I wrote Esther from the West Coast and proposed myself as a guest. She couldn't refuse an old friend of her first husband's who had to come East anyway, and now you come up with this story of yours about a conversation heard over an open telephone line. Murchison gave me the gist of it when he came here this morning asking for confirmation of Esther's alibi, but he didn't go into details. Can you repeat the actual words?"

"I can try."

Payne listened, his gaze on the fire. "There's one odd thing. The sex of the potential victim is never mentioned. There isn't a single 'he' or 'she.' "

"What of it?"

"Obviously, two lovers were plotting to kill someone. But why assume it was the woman's husband?"

"But who else —?"

"Isn't it equally possible that these lovers were plotting to kill the man's wife? Curtis may be willing to make divorce easy for Esther if she wants it, but would Kate be willing to make divorce easy for Peter? Or would she make the whole thing very unpleasant? Particularly unpleasant for a young man who is dependent on his mother?"

"Oh, no!" Amy was on her feet. Blindly she stumbled toward the picture window. Mist was swirling through the trees, across the hedges. . . . Not Peter. Not Kate. Amy pressed her hot forehead to the cool glass. "Don't let it be Peter!"

The picture window.

Then she knew.

Payne was startled by the look in her eyes as she turned. "Everything you've said was a lie. It was you all along. You are Esther's lover. You

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killed Charley Maitland. You killed Sharpe. And you are going to kill Curtis Gregory. I see it all now. And I'm going to prove it."

"You can't, because it isn't true!"

Amy ran into the hall. Footsteps behind her spurred her flight.

"What in heaven's name —?" It was Esther's voice.

Amy looked back. Esther was coming down the wide stairs. She had paused in the grace of arrested motion, one hand on the balustrade.

Payne, in the doorway of the living-room, was looking up at her. Their eyes met and held, unsmiling, intent.

To Amy the tableau was like an illustration of the snatch of drama she had overheard yesterday. The fire that smoldered so darkly in the woman's eyes, brilliant against the dull pallor of her face. The buoyant posture of the man's lean, supple body; the brooding look on his swarthy face, harder and more virile than a merely handsome face. A born gambler, a buccaneer to his fingertips. And the woman an outlaw, too, at heart. Both drawn irresistibly together when they met in an orderly, ponderous world like Curtis Gregory's or Charley Maitland's, where there was a place for every emotion and every emotion was kept in its place. These two seemed the star-crossed lovers of all time, desperate, doomed.

"Amy!" called Esther. "Where are you going?"

"To Allan's!"

Amy turned and ran out to her car . . .

Allan's car was standing in his driveway when Amy drove between the gateposts.

"Can't it wait?" Allan stood in the doorway, bag in hand.

"Let your patients wait a few minutes. This is vital, Allan. The man was Payne, and I can prove it."

"Payne?" Never before had Allan seemed so slow. "But it can't be Payne!"

"Why not? It is, and we must do something about it. Let me tell you."

"All right." Allan seemed dazed as he followed her into the house.

In the waiting-room he sat side-saddle on the edge of the table and lit a cigarette. "I'm a busy man Amy. Please make it brief."

"Allan! Aren't you interested in saving Curtis Gregory's life?"

"Not particularly." His eyelids dropped as he shook ash into a tray. "Curtis is a grown man. Let him take care of himself. He's been warned. I'll do anything the police require, but I'm not going out of my way to stir up mud."

"I'm not going out of my way, either!" Red flags were flying in Amy's cheeks. "This was thrust upon me. . . . Allan, you were wrong. It wasn't here, in this room of yours, that those two — Esther and Payne — were talking when I overheard them on the telephone."

"What?" She had really startled Allan this time.

"As Kate said last night, there are lots of living-rooms in Oldport that are 30 feet wide, with hard, uncar-

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peted floors and picture windows."

"I know that," retorted Allan. "But we have to explain the apparent coincidence; out of several thousand possible wrong numbers, you got one where you overheard someone you knew — Esther. There's only one explanation — the one I gave you last night. My number was in your mind because you were going to ask for it next. Your tongue slipped and you asked for it the first time without realizing you had done so. We have the same friends, so it wasn't surprising that here you overheard someone you knew, if you did. All quite simple."

"Allan, it was simpler than that. Don't you see it? I didn't get a wrong number. My tongue didn't slip."

"You didn't —?" He looked at her sharply.

"Do you remember what number I intended to call first?"

"The Gregorys'."

"Exactly. I did ask for the Gregorys' number, just as I thought I did, and I got the Gregorys' number. It was that simple. There was no coincidence at all. What threw me off at the time was the voice that seemed to belong to a Negro butler. For when I called the number a second time, the Irish voice of their maid told me there were no butlers and no Negroes there. That and the word 'stables' confused me. Curtis used to call that building the barn before he married Esther."

"You mean Sharpe answered the Gregorys' telephone that first time?"

"Why not? Sharpe worked for a landscape gardening company. That afternoon he must have been trimming the Gregorys' hedges. He heard the telephone and no one answered, so he stepped inside and answered it himself, just as we thought he did here. Even my asking for 'Mrs. Corbett' made no difference. Mother was just as likely to be there as here. And what place safer for Esther to hold that conversation than their own home while Curtis was out and the maids in their own quarters? Once she discovered that I thought the conversation had taken place here, she said she'd been at home all afternoon. That's why she looked so slyly pleased — I'd given her a sort of alibi."

"But what makes you think Payne is the man?"

"Who else can it be? You were making house visits when Sharpe died. Peter was here getting empirin for Mother. That leaves only Payne. Last night Esther thought it safe to admit that he was home with her all that afternoon when Curtis was out, because the conversation I overheard was supposed to have taken place here. Of course, she said Payne was upstairs, while she was downstairs, but that could be a lie."

"And the Siamese cat?"

"This afternoon the Gregorys' maid said something about a stray kitten being there yesterday. I was never sure that the cat I heard was a Siamese; I merely thought it might be."

Allan rose and began to pace the floor. "Why was Sharpe killed here?

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You think Payne followed him?"

"Of course. Payne and Esther couldn't afford to have his body found there. Allan, don't you see what must have happened in the middle of that conversation? Payne or Esther noticed the unhooked telephone and broke the connection. Sharpe came back from the Gregorys' stable to the Gregorys' living-room, expecting to find the line still open. They said they had broken the connection accidentally and asked him who had called. He answered, 'Miss Corbett.'

"Esther and Payne realized I must have overheard something. They knew I couldn't recognize the voices of Payne, a stranger, and Esther, a woman I scarcely knew. They hoped I wouldn't identify those voices when I heard them again. But whether I did or not, I would never have any corroborating evidence as long as I never met Sharpe. He was the only witness who knew I had been listening to an open telephone line there while he went to the stable to look for my mother. He was the only witness who knew that Payne and Esther were the pair he found talking there when he came back from the stable."

"And Sharpe wasn't kicked by my mare at all?"

"Why assume that? Because he was found dead in the stable? Because the wound was shaped like a horseshoe? Couldn't Payne strike Sharpe's head with a horseshoe? And wouldn't he do it in a stable, so it would look as if a horse had done it?"

Allan paused in his pacing. "The voice! I knew there was a flaw somewhere in your reasoning! What about Payne's voice? It isn't harsh and rasping."

"That's why I came here tonight, Allan. There must be some explanation. You're a doctor. Think. Isn't there something physical a man can take to change his voice? Some drug or irritant?"

"Wait!" said Allan sharply. "Payne had no reason to disguise his voice when you first heard him over the telephone because he didn't know then that he was going to be overheard. And you can't believe he's been disguising his voice since then without Curtis noticing the difference. Curtis has known Payne ever since Curtis married Esther. He told me so himself."

"Then it must have been a piece of pure gambler's luck that Payne's voice was different when I first heard it over the telephone. Is there any disease that makes a voice harsh for only an hour or so?"

"And then restores it to normal a few hours later?" There was relief in Allan's smile, as well as amusement. "It's no use, Amy. That voice is one thing you just can't get around."

Amy was reaching for the cigarette box, when she halted suddenly, looking down at one of the medical magazines on the table. "Allan, I have it! This word on the cover!"

"What word?" He was no longer smiling.

"Allergy! That's something that comes and goes suddenly, capri-

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ciously. I once had a skin allergy to nail polish, and I know. Suppose Payne has a throat allergy. Suppose he was exposed to the stimulus, whatever it may be, just before I heard him talking to Esther that first time. He would know that if he could get his voice back to normal before he met me at dinner, I would never identify it. Aren't there new ways of controlling allergic symptoms? Antihistamine drugs? Bacteriophage? Sedatives? Even throat lozenges and inhalants can clear up hoarseness in a couple of hours."

"It usually takes longer," insisted Allan.

"But not always. Allan, don't be so skeptical! If we look up the case histories —"

Allan grinned. "Have you forgotten I have patients waiting for me now?"

"Then let me look through these medical books while you see your patients. When you get back I may have found something."

He looked at her dubiously, brows bunched together, mouth a thin line. "All right, but it happens to be Mrs. Adams' night off."

"The housekeeper? Then you can come home with me when you get back, and we'll have dinner there."

"Hasn't this affected your appetite?"

"What do you mean?"

"The bloodhound act. It's a job for the police. I want no part of it."

"But —"

"You think I'm thinking of Esther. I'm not. I'm thinking of that poor devil, Payne. Suppose he did fall for Esther and all the rest of it. Do you think you'll be very happy if he and Esther are arrested for murder because of you?"

"Do you think you'll be very happy if you pick up your paper some morning and find they have killed Curtis because we did nothing to stop them?"

"All right, Amy. You win."

After he had gone Amy drew a Venetian blind across the picture window, switched on a table lamp, and began to read. When she shut the book and looked up, night had closed in upon her. She was alone. There were not even any traffic noises now from the side road at the foot of the drive. She looked at the clock. Quarter of 8. What was keeping Allan?

She went out into the hall and turned on the lamp there. Houri, the Siamese cat, came toward her, pausing to dig claws into the rug, daintily and precisely. "You're company, anyway." Amy spoke largely to hear the sound of her own voice, and — the lights went out.

One moment she had been contemplating the sinuous ripple of the cat's tail in the lamplight. Then there was no cat, no lamp, no light, nothing but impenetrable darkness, as if she were suddenly struck blind. That meant the light in the waiting-room had gone out, too, for she had left the door open behind her. A short circuit? A fuse blown? She had no idea where the fuse box was.

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She would talk to Allan tomorrow. At the moment she wanted nothing so much as the reassuring brightness of her car's headlights.

She opened the front door. Something brushed her ankles. Houri slipping out for a late prowl. Had she left her car on the right or the left? Night and mist together made it impossible to see. She groped her way toward the car.

Something hard caught her neck. Under a rough cloth sleeve she felt the pressure of an arm constricting her throat. A leather-gloved palm clasped nose and mouth, choking off breath. She struggled, but her feet slipped. She could not turn, for there was a knee against her spine. Blood began to beat and sing in her temples. Her head seemed to swell as her throat contracted. Somewhere a hard heel scraped gravel and a blow thudded close to her ear. She was thrown to the ground.

Her palms burned as they grazed the stones but she was scarcely conscious of the sting. She crouched, drawing cool sea air into her lungs in snatches, hardly aware of sore throat or pounding pulses. Somewhere in the distance someone was running.

"All right?" A pale beam of light crossed the gravel beside her hands. Someone was lifting her. She pushed tangled hair from her eyes with the back of her hand, and felt something cool and wet her hand left there — blood or mud, or both. She tried to stop panting, and looked up at the face in the dim glow of a flashlight.

"You!"

Matthew Payne sat back on one heel, the other knee upright, like a cowboy crouching before a campfire. A smile touched one corner of his mouth. "Whom did you expect?"

"But — Who ran away?"

"Someone who just tried to kill you. I would have followed him if I had known you were not injured."

"Did you see who it was?"

"No. Did you think it was I?"

She tried to study his face in the faint light. "I — I'm afraid I did."

The smile widened. "So much pleasanter to believe a murderer isn't someone you've known all your life, isn't it?"

"But why would anyone try to kill me?"

"Perhaps you've been asking too many questions. Or perhaps —"

"What?"

"Perhaps you were mistaken for someone else. It was very dark. You're tall for a girl, and one trench coat is much like another. . . . Let me help you to your car. I'll drive you home."

"You came here on foot?"

"There's a short cut by foot. And I like walking."

"In the mist?"

"Good cover if you're watching somebody else."

"Whom were you watching?"

"You. How else do you suppose I turned up in the nick of time? I heard you tell Esther where you were going when you bolted so unceremoniously. I saw the look on Esther's face and I

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thought there might be trouble, so I trailed along. Just before the lights went out I thought I heard footsteps at the back of the house. I went around there to investigate, and came front again when I heard the noise of a scuffle here. That's how I missed seeing whoever it was monkeying with the electric wires."

Amy sank into the front seat of the car, with a shudder.

"Tell me," said Payne. "Why are you so sure I'm a murderer? Aside from my being a stranger?"

"It wasn't here at Allan's that they were talking when I overheard them — Esther and the man. It was at the Gregorys'." She told him how she knew. "You were alone with Esther at the Gregorys' house that afternoon."

"I was at the Gregorys'. But I wasn't with Esther. I was upstairs, in my own room. She could have talked to anyone in her living-room."

"Then why did you look at Esther so intensely this afternoon? I was sure you were the lover then!"

Payne chuckled. "Hate is intense as well as love. I told you I don't like Esther."

Amy groaned. "Then, if it wasn't you, after all, we're right back where we started — except that I like you better."

"Because I came to your rescue?"

"You seem like another person." What she had thought sardonic was now simply quizzical; what she had thought rash was now attractively daring.

"We've made some progress, in more ways than one." He was smiling. "For one, I think that conversation did take place at the Gregorys', just because it's more likely you got a telephone number you thought you gave than a wrong number. Is there any detail that doesn't fit?"

Amy leaned her aching head in her hands. "One phrase: 'Where is the Nembutal?' That sounds to me as if Esther were here in the waiting-room keeping watch, while the man was in Allan's office getting the drug."

"Not to me. No criminals would linger to discuss plans in a place where they've just stolen something. More likely, the man came here alone to get the Nembutal and took it back to Esther in her own home, where they could talk more freely. Anything else?"

"The man's voice. Why was it so hoarse? No friend of Esther's that I know has such a voice. Was it the man's normal voice? Or had some physical cause affected it temporarily? An allergy?"

"Allergy!" Payne struck the steering wheel with one fist. "That does it, Amy!" It was the first time he had called her "Amy." "Tomorrow I must talk with Murchison."

"The police won't be interested. They think Sharpe was killed by Allan's mare."

"They did at first," retorted Payne. "But Murchison told me this morning that their lab man said the blow couldn't have been inflicted by the kicking or trampling of a horse —

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not enough weight back of it. There was a human fist holding that horseshoe. And a human brain that didn't know how nicely the weight behind a blow can be calculated from the nature of a wound."

As Payne started the car and turned it, a swath of light swept over the gravel. Amy was jolted forward as he stopped suddenly. "Look!" Spotlighted on the gravel lay a small, still heap of fur.

"Houri! She belonged to Allan's housekeeper! She was alive a moment ago. Oh, Matt! Why? And how?"

Payne shut off the engine and left the car. "Knife."

"Could anyone stab a Siamese without being clawed?"

"Perhaps. If the knife were thrown. Certain branches of the Army taught a lot of men all about knife-throwing. And strangling." Payne turned the cat's body over with his foot. "The knife isn't here."

There was a wicked spark of anger in his eyes as he came back to the car. Somewhere in the depths of Amy's mind a small voice whispered: *Certain branches of the Army . . . or the OSS.* . . . She pushed the thought out of her mind.

"Amy," Payne was saying, "tomorrow night you shall hear that hoarse voice again. The one you overheard on the telephone."

"You mean at the Gregorys' dinner?"

"It's the only way. And there is time to get things ready — a whole day tomorrow. I shan't tell you more now. You might lose your nerve. And you must find the nerve to identify that voice tomorrow. . . . Why the tears?"

"Only three people knew where I was this evening: Esther and you and — Allan."

"Esther might have told someone else."

"Then Allan isn't involved in this?"

"Of course Allan is involved." Payne's glance strayed toward the sprawling house, glittering white in the glare from the headlights. "Building is expensive these days. Even in a fashionable summer resort a doctor doesn't make enough in a year's practice to pay for that new wing, plus a stable and a thoroughbred saddle horse." . . .

Amy was the first to arrive at the Gregorys' that evening. Esther was in the living-room alone. A collar of amethysts clasped her white throat. Her dress, glossy as her dark hair, was a Parma-violet color, falling in stiff folds and deep dimples that the rosy firelight flushed with orchid. Amy looked at the amethysts, suddenly conscious of the tulle that hid bruises on her own neck.

"A sore throat? My dear, I'm so sorry!" Esther's apparent concern gave Amy a giddy sense of unreality.

Curtis came into the room, his face still and unsmiling. "Payne told me you were attacked, Amy."

"Attacked?" Esther's thin brows climbed.

"A strangler. What they call a 'mugger' in New York. But you don't

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expect that in Oldport. She was leaving Allan's house." Curtis sat by the picture window, his profile silhouetted against a wide view of the evening sky. "You're not very gay," he said to Esther.

"Should I be?"

"This party's for you." His voice was toneless. Heavy brows shadowed his eyes. Something disturbed him. Could it be that his first, faint doubt of Esther was growing to intolerable proportions?

She spoke bitterly: "The party was your idea, not mine, and —" She broke off with a start that was almost guilty. Payne stood in the doorway.

"Come in, Matt!" Uneasiness made Esther curt.

Payne crossed the room with a loping, loose-hipped walk as Southwestern as his slight drawl. "A charming dress, Esther," he said, halting beside her.

"Thank you." She was in no mood for compliments.

Amy heard the purr of tires on gravel. A car door slammed. Allan's voice was loud and cheerful as he came into the room: "Hello, Esther — Amy." He nodded to Curtis and Payne. "Why are you all so solemn?"

"Amy doesn't feel well." Malice flashed into Esther's eyes. "She claims some maniac tried to strangle her last night when she was leaving your house!"

"I didn't say it was a maniac," murmured Amy.

"You're serious?" Allan was shocked.

"Yes." Involuntarily Amy put a hand to her throat. "And he was sane enough to lure me outside by blowing a fuse or causing a short circuit, so the house was plunged in darkness."

"There was a short circuit when I got back." Allan stood under the light from the chandelier. For the first time, his gray eyes looked bleak and calculating to Amy. "Did you report this?"

"What's the use?"

"But you should! He must be the same fellow who knifed poor Houri last night. That does look like mania."

A second car purred into the driveway. Through portieres, Amy saw her mother and Kate going upstairs in outdoor wraps. Peter waited at the foot of the stairs until they came down again.

"Esther, dear!" Natalie came in briskly. "I think you're splendid to go through with this. Of course, it's perfectly clear to me that the man who attacked Amy is either a psychotic or a hoodlum from New York, but —"

"Why is it perfectly clear?" asked Payne quietly.

Natalie fluttered a little. "Well, the hoodlum technique. Mugging, you know. Who else had anything to gain by it?"

Curtis intervened: "Here come the cocktails. Let's talk about something more pleasant, shall we?"

Kate had not uttered a word. Her eyes seemed larger than ever in her small, immature face. As the maid served cocktails, Amy made her way

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to Kate's side. "Anything wrong?"

"Just Peter. And Esther. How is it going to end?"

Peter approached. "Not drinking, Kate?"

Her smile was sickly. "I'm not in the mood."

"Oh?" He looked at her oddly. Just then someone choked.

It was Curtis Gregory. He set down his glass. Esther flashed him a lightning glance. Anguish? Despair? The choking became a cough, hacking, uncontrollable. He held a handkerchief to his lips. His eyes were red and watering.

"Swallow the wrong way?" Allan moved swiftly to his side.

Curtis shook his head, the handkerchief still masking his face.

"Aspirin, then. Hold the tablet in your mouth until it dissolves. It will check this at once." Allan's grip on the shaking shoulder was firm. "Don't try to talk, old man. Come upstairs."

They moved toward the door. It was Allan who stopped suddenly. His voice shook with anger: "What the devil is that beast doing here?"

Through the music-room doorway a small Maltese cat padded noiselessly into the room, sniffing at the unfamiliar odors of strange feet, letting an incurious green gaze slide over strange faces.

"Get out!" Esther backed away, withdrawing the hem of her skirt. A paw darted. A ripping sound left a scar on the violet satin.

"Upstairs! Quick!" Allan drew Curtis away.

But Payne barred their path. "Why are you taking charge, Allan?"

"Because I am Curtis's physician!"

"Of course." Payne's smile twisted. "A doctor has so many opportunities for blackmail."

"What do you mean?"

"There had to be a doctor who supplied the Nembutal two days ago. And there had to be a doctor who helped Curtis suppress the symptoms of that allergy yesterday, and for the last three years. Who else but a doctor trying to establish himself in practice after the war? A doctor's fees vary according to the income of each patient. Even the income-tax people wouldn't suspect a doctor who suddenly became rich. When the going got tough, you naturally did everything you could to protect such a source of income. That's why you suggested to Amy that your waiting-room was the scene of the conversation she overheard. You hoped that would diffuse suspicion. Anyone might walk into a doctor's waiting-room. But only a few people had easy access to the Gregorys' living-room."

Allan dropped Curtis's arm. "Blackmail! Preposterous! I—"

"Not only blackmail." Payne's voice was hard. "Accessory after the fact of murder. Unless you are going to talk."

"Murder! You don't think I had anything to do with Sharpe's death or with —" Allan stopped abruptly and then said, "I must have a lawyer before I say anything."

"Curtis, let me get you upstairs."

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Esther's voice was low and rich with feeling as she moved forward to take the place Allan had deserted.

But Payne still blocked the way. "One question, Curtis: Why is that cat in this house tonight?"

Curtis shrugged.

"Does it matter now?" Esther was contemptuous.

"I can tell you how the cat got here," said Payne. "I brought him in myself, secretly, this morning, so he would be in the house all day, before we met this evening. But why did I do that?"

Again Curtis shrugged.

"Aren't you going to answer me in words, Curtis? Are you afraid to speak, with that cat and Amy Corbett both in the same room?"

"Don't say a word!" It was more like a sob than a cry from Esther.

Curtis touched her arm. "My dear, what's the use? They know. They're going to prove it. Let's get this over with." He turned toward Amy, his eyes so sad and shamed she could scarcely meet them. "Well, Amy? Is this the voice of the man you overheard talking over an open telephone line?"

The deep, hoarse tones, so unlike Curtis's normal voice, died away. Amy nodded. "Yes." She couldn't say more. There were tears in her own eyes.

"Oh, my dear — my dear —" Esther pushed her cocktail glass into Curtis's hand, then she put her arms around him, her head against his shoulder.

Curtis gently disengaged himself. He drained the cocktail before he turned to Payne: "Why did you do this to us?"

"Because you and Esther killed my best friend, Charley Maitland, in order to marry each other, and you were planning to kill me, when you saw I suspected it.

"The cat, whose cry Amy heard over the open telephone line two days ago, was a stray kitten that wandered in here and that Esther forced her maid to give away afterward. That cat was what made your voice unrecognizably hoarse when Amy heard it over the telephone. For you have a respiratory allergy to the dander of cats. It must have developed when you were on the West Coast during the war, for no one here knew about it.

"When I telephoned Charley Maitland's house the night he died, yours was the strange voice that answered the telephone. Your voice was rasping then, so that I couldn't identify it afterward — a rasping caused temporarily by the Persian cats Charley Maitland bred. You didn't want anyone to know you were in Maitland's house the night he died. So you did everything you could to conceal your allergy and its symptoms.

"When you came East again, your doctor, Allan, discovered the cause of your allergy. He helped you conceal it by avoiding the cause and suppressing the symptoms as quickly as he could when avoidance wasn't possible But your anxiety about it made him

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suspicious, and he discovered enough of the truth to be able to blackmail you.

"You were late when you reached Mrs. Corbett's house that first evening because you had already killed Sharpe in Allan's stable. When you came out on the terrace you were careful to say to Esther in Amy's hearing, 'Where have you been all afternoon? I thought you were going to meet me at the club for a swim.' You wanted Amy to think you and Esther had not been together since lunchtime. When, later, you pleaded with Amy to forget the whole thing and make peace with Esther, you were pleading for yourself as well as for Esther.

"The fact that you really liked Amy and didn't want to injure her made it all the worse for you. It was not Amy you were trying to kill when she left Allan's house last night. It was I, Matt Payne, the one person from Esther's past whose very existence was a perpetual threat to Esther and yourself. Maitland's friend, who, once he heard your hoarse, allergic voice again, would know that you were with Esther and Maitland when Maitland died.

"Esther had told you I was following Amy to Allan's. When you saw Allan leave the house you assumed Amy had gone already. But there was still a light in the waiting-room. You thought it was I, prying into Allan's records for evidence of blackmail. You caused a short circuit with outside wires to bring me outdoors. When you saw the tall figure in a mannish trench coat through the misty darkness, you were sure it was I, not Amy, so you attacked."

Payne looked at his watch. "I didn't expect the allergic symptoms to develop quite so soon. Murchison was to have been on hand. As it is, we can expect him here at any moment."

"You're too late!" Esther's brilliant eyes defied him mockingly, then softened as she turned back to Curtis. "Forgive me, dear."

Curtis smiled. "Did you think I didn't know what you had put in that cocktail? Thank you, Esther!" He cherished her face against his cheek and, at last, Amy saw Curtis as he really was — a star-crossed lover, doomed and desperate, Paolo to Esther's Francesca. . . .

Afterward Payne came to see Amy at her apartment in New York.

"Charley Maitland wouldn't divorce Esther," said Payne. "Hence that misleading phrase: 'Didn't seem like adultery when it was you and I.' They talked of running away together without divorce, but that takes money. Esther had no money of her own. The war had brought Curtis near bankruptcy, since he was a silk importer. When they realized that Maitland's life insurance would pull Curtis out of his financial hole, while Maitland's death would make it possible for them to marry, the situation became intolerable to them, and three years ago, while Curtis was still in the Army, they killed Maitland."

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"And did Curtis kill that Siamese cat?" prompted Amy.

"He had to keep the cat at a good distance or his voice would become hoarse again. He couldn't risk that, for he didn't know how soon he might meet you afterward. It was too dark and foggy to see shape, but he could see movement. He threw his old army knife at a movement so close to the ground it had to be animal rather than human. Luckily for you."

"Why luckily for me?"

"He thought you were I. Why do you suppose he had the knife with him?"

Amy shuddered. "Not Allan. Not Peter. But Curtis. The one I trusted."

"You first met Curtis when you were twelve years old and he was about thirty. How could a girl that age realize what a mature man is really like under the civilized shell?"

"And now?"

Payne shrugged. "There won't be any trial. Allan is pleading guilty to an accessory charge. Curtis and Esther died in each other's arms after Murchison reached the house."

Amy's voice quavered: "'*And none, I think, do there embrace . . .*'"

Payne laid a hand on hers. "What about having dinner with me tonight?"

To her own amazement, she said, "Yes."

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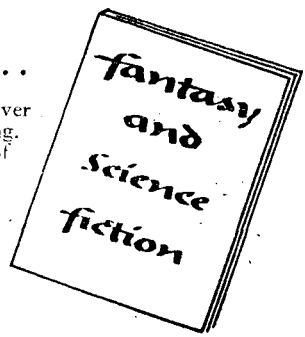

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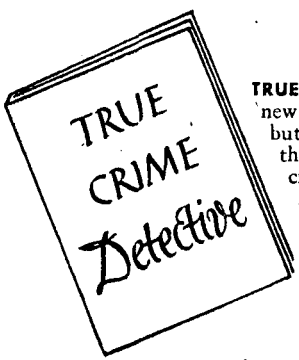

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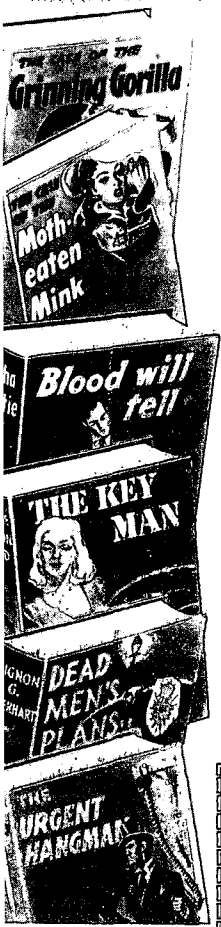

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